

ACCESS/ING EDUCATION
A Feminist Post/Structuralist Ethnography of
Widening Educational Participation

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Abstract

This thesis represents a small-scale ethnography of access education. Using methods of auto/biography, I study the field of access education through students' life stories, spoken narratives and diary entries, while writing myself and aspects of my own auto/biography into the research. My analytical approach is framed by feminist post/structural theories, drawing on analytical tools such as deconstruction and discourse analysis and conceptual tools including power, collaboration through praxis, reflexivity, subjectivity and experience. The thesis focuses on a group of students returning to learning through various 'access courses' available at their local FE College within the context of burgeoning national policy on widening educational participation. In examining the competing discourses within the field of access education, it reveals the hidden dynamics in which access students are re/positioned in complex, contradictory and multiple ways. The research examines the implications of educational participation for access students and explores the effectiveness of interactive and collaborative approaches to the research and education of marginalised groups. The ethnography situates students and researcher as co-participants. Placing mature students' representations of educational experiences at the centre of knowledge production, the thesis argues that we must understand the backgrounds, interests and experiences of the particular social groups that policy seeks to target. I argue for the revitalisation of lively discussions about pedagogy within access education rooted in reflexive praxis that are committed to a politics of difference and to anticlassist, anti(hetero)sexist and antiracist practices. New forms of access practices that are inclusive and responsive to fluidity and context are presented through the insights of co-participants.

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Abbreviations

DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
FE	Further Education
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GNVQ	General National Vocational Qualification
HE	Higher Education
ILA	Individual Learning Account
JSA	Job Seeker's Allowance
NOCN	National Open College Network
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
OCN	Open College Network
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
RTS	Return to Study
Ufi	University for Industry

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Chapter One: Introduction

The challenge presented by widening participation...is not in our view about 'helping' the socially excluded; or squeezing more non-traditional students into increasingly overcrowded lecture theatres, or sitting them in front of on-line learning packages in order that technical facilitators can enable them to function as self-directed learners. Neither is it simply a question of providing vocational qualifications that will hold out the promise of a better stake in the global labour market. It is not even about 'stretching' a system that was designed for an elite to accommodate a wider cross-section of the population in the interests of meritocracy.

Rather, it is about developing a sustained critique of current rhetoric, developing a distinctive *social* theory of knowledge derived from a politically committed analysis and theory of power which leads to a form of pedagogy that is concerned to democratise knowledge making and learning, in ways that redefine the very parameters of what counts as higher education (Thompson, 2000: 10).

Introduction

This chapter introduces my thesis, a small-scale ethnography focusing on the discursive field of access education and the key subjects positioned within it, the access students. Using methods of auto/biography, I attempt in this ethnography to understand the field of access education through students' life stories, spoken narratives and diary entries, while writing myself and aspects of my own auto/biography into the research. I use a variety of research methods, including diaries, written auto/biographies, recorded conversations with individual participants, recorded group discussions and examination of national policy texts. My approach is framed by feminist post/structural theories, drawing on analytical tools such as deconstruction and discourse theory and conceptual tools including power, collaboration, praxis, reflexivity, subjectivity, positionality and experience.

The research involves uncovering the hegemonic discourses¹, social practices and power relations within the realm of post-compulsory education that operate to re/position subjects in particular ways as classed, gendered, raced and sexualised. I am also interested in the ways that subjects actively re/position

themselves and experience their identities as shifting, multiple and contradictory as they negotiate their engagement with the world of ideas through educational participation. The study focuses on a group of students returning to learning through various 'access courses' and their active involvement with such programmes. I occupy the position of both teacher and researcher within this ethnography and highlight the dilemmas and the benefits of this dual location. In the thesis, I explore the possibility of collaborative research approaches that situate the researcher and the researched as 'co-participants' of the research process. This demands that co-participants exercise reflexivity throughout the research, addressing power relations, ethical issues, the ways that knowledge is (re) produced through research and the possibility of reconstructing theory through collaborative social inquiry.

The Auto/biography of the question

I am concerned with writing myself into this feminist post/structuralist ethnography as a co-participant of the research. Importantly, the research process was complicated *and* enhanced by my position as a teacher, researching her students, and as a woman juggling paid and unpaid work, in an attempt to negotiate the patriarchal boundaries that separate off the private and the public realms of social life. I did not experience my research as a separate entity. My life as a mother, wife, grand/daughter, friend, teacher, student, external moderator and researcher all overlapped, clashed and reinforced each other in ways that is often left silenced and untheorised in the academic world of what it means to do doctoral research.

A researcher approaches and makes sense of her/his work according to a complex web of factors including class, gender and 'race' positionality, current socio-cultural conditions, and geographical, political and historical contexts. As Diane Reay explains, 'all research is in one way or another autobiographical or else the avoidance of autobiography' (Reay, 1998: 2). My research is influenced by my positionality, my identification as a feminist, and the many other discursive dynamics that constitute my perspectives and subjectivity/ies, and consequently, I am drawn towards the theories that resonate with my own

experiences, values and beliefs. This has compelled me towards critical social research and feminism, both which explicitly politicise research (Carspecken, 1996; Maynard and Purvis: 1994; Epstein, 1991, 1993; Harding, 1991; see Chapter 3). A major concern of the research is to develop access education that:

- opens spaces to deconstruct dominant discourses
- reveals and disrupts unequal power relations
- attempts to reconstruct counter-hegemonic discourses

Therefore my research is fundamentally and explicitly political.

This research project grew from my experiences of having the opportunity to rebuild my life through access education after surviving domestic violence. I start therefore from 'the autobiography of the question' (Miller, 1997: 4), which means:

beginning with the story of [my] own interest in the question [I am] asking and planning to research into. From that initial story, [I] may move towards the mapping of [my] developing sense of the question's interest for [me] onto the history of more public kinds of attention to it. This becomes a way of historicising the questions [I am] addressing and of setting [my life] and educational history within contexts more capacious than [my] own. Theory becomes theories; historically contrived to address or explain particular questions; and we are all theorists (*ibid.*).

This research also represents an 'intellectual biography' (Stanley, 1992) as my research questions changed through my exposure to various different theoretical positions. Beverly Skeggs explains that our trajectory through theories and theorists is interlinked with our autobiographies. 'The period in which research takes place, the social location of the researcher and access to theories is central to the motivations and framing of the research' (Skeggs, 1995b: 195). Certain theory speaks louder to me, and the reason that I find some theories more convincing than others will relate to my location in the social world across positional, relational, spatial, temporal and discursive factors. As Skeggs explains:

We are thus being continually positioned by and positioning ourselves in relation to theory. This is not just a case of what we read but who we talk to, our institutional location, what our colleagues read, which conferences we go to and sometimes how we feel at the time (Skeggs, 1995b: 196).

My research on access education began as an undergraduate studying *The Experiences of Mature Women Students*; motivated by my support for and belief in the feminist goal to 'make the voices of women heard'. Drawing on feminist sociology, at the time my work was greatly influenced by theories of gender socialisation and patriarchal domination (Walby, 1990; Hartmann, 1979; Daly, 1978; Millett, 1970). This led me to apply for an MA in Women's Studies and Education, specifically with the aim to expand my research on access education. My MA dissertation was about *The Policy and Practice of Women's Access to Education* and now represents a pilot study in preparation for this thesis. These various stages of my research interest in access education are visible in my work, not only in terms of level of nuance and sophistication, but also in terms of theoretical orientations. When I finally came to writing a proposal for this thesis in 1998, the questions I asked were largely influenced by feminist and critical social theory. For example, the two key questions I asked in the proposal were:

- How can we widen educational participation to include those most invisible in our society?
- How can education serve to challenge and interrupt persistent divisions and inequalities within British society?

As I engaged with feminist poststructural theory, my focus shifted to questions about subjectivity and positionality in relation to access education. These included questions such as:

- How do access students experience their subjectivity/ies as shifting while being positioned through dominant humanist discourses as fixed and unified selves regulated in particular ways as classed, gendered, raced and sexualised?

Such shifts in theoretical orientation, clearly shaping and transforming the research emphasis and approach, reinforce the idea that all research is indeed auto/biographical. A key theme throughout this thesis is 'auto/biography', appearing in this research as a concept, a method of data collection and a methodological issue (see Chapter Three). I insert the slash in 'auto/biography' to represent the ways that the story of 'the self' is always a social story and always interacts and interconnects with the story of others (Birch, 1998; Stanley, 1992).

Aims and Research Questions

This research is located within the area of post-compulsory education that explicitly aims to widen access to groups who have been socially and culturally excluded from educational participation. This mobilising force within adult education has come to be known as the 'access movement', and is most celebrated for its establishment of discrete courses across Britain named 'Access to Higher Education'². Since 1978, the 'access movement' has contributed significantly to the opening of educational opportunities to traditionally excluded groups (Williams, 1997a). However, access has undergone dramatic cultural changes over the past decade, through formalisation, standardisation, incorporation, marketisation and centralisation (Kirton, 1999; Lucas *et al*, 1997; Spours and Lucas, 1996).

Access education³ has been closely affiliated with movements for social justice, including feminism and antiracism and has endeavoured to widen participation to those social groups that have been historically, structurally and culturally excluded from degree-level study (Benn, Elliott and Whaley, 1998:2; Fieldhouse, 1996:73; Thompson, 1980). It has also attempted to challenge the dominant canons and discourses in operation within and without academia (Kennedy and Piette, 1991). Concerned with redressing the educational inequalities firmly rooted within the academic world, it has sought to challenge the androcentrism and eurocentrism that reproduces middle-class, white-ethnic and male privilege throughout the university system (Thompson, 1997). However, the prevailing discourse of the New Right over the past 15 years has penetrated the field of access education, slowly undermining its commitment and

relationship to issues of social inequality and injustice (Barr, 1999: 13; Benn, Elliott and Whaley, 1998: 1). It is my argument, therefore, that access education has largely moved away from a radical politics of social justice to a neo-liberal politics of vocationalism, competition and individualism (Thompson, 2000: 7; Ryan, 2000: 45).

The research aims underpinning this thesis, then, represent an attempt to reclaim the radical politics associated with the access movement. This has compelled me towards an eclectic conceptual framework, embracing both feminist structural and poststructural theory. Feminist structural theory, because of its commitment to liberatory projects, provides a framework for this research as 'praxis'⁴, which focuses on the possibility of emancipatory access education. I also consider the possibility of emancipatory research (Robinson, 1997), although I argue that feminist researchers and teachers must recognise the limitations of research and education as tools for social change and justice (Maynard, and Purvis, 1994). Poststructuralism, I argue, helps explore further the complexity of power relations, the multiplicity and mutability of identity and the fluidity of culture (Hernandez, 1997; Flax, 1995). *Feminist* post/structuralism⁵ develops poststructuralist theory, rejecting the tendency towards nominalism⁶, and maintaining the importance of concepts such as 'gender' and 'class' through the concept of positionality (Alcoff, 1988). Alcoff conceptualises identity as relative to a 'constantly shifting context, to a situation that includes a network of elements involving others, the objective economic conditions, cultural and political institutions and ideologies and so on' (Alcoff, 1988). This problematises the category 'woman', while enabling a

feminist argument for women, not on a claim that their innate capacities are being stunted, but that their position within the network lacks power and mobility and requires radical change' (Alcoff, 1988: 433-434).

I insert the slash in feminist post/structuralism to signify a joining together of the insights of feminist structural and poststructural theories, which recognise the complexity of the subject's relationship to the social world, in terms of power, positionality and subjectivity. It should be pointed out that the 'post' in

poststructural does not merely represent a theory *following* structuralism, but *builds on* the insights of structuralism.

Four overarching aims drive this project (see Figure 1.A).

RESEARCH AIMS
To trace the shifting, contradictory and hegemonic discourses in play within the field of access education. To deconstruct the dominant discourses of widening educational participation, examining its impact on the policy and political contexts in which access education is firmly located.
To examine the implications of participation in access education for the lives, experiences and subjectivity/ies of access students.
To consider the possibilities for access education opening spaces for localised change that address social justice issues of cultural recognition and structural equality.
To make a methodological contribution to the development of collaborative approaches within feminist research on access education. To contribute to the development of collaborative pedagogical approaches within access education.

Figure 1.A: Research Aims

One is to trace the shifting, contradictory and hegemonic discourses in play within the field of access education. I am concerned with deconstructing dominant discourses of widening educational participation, and examining its impact on the policy and political contexts in which access education is firmly located. In using deconstruction I aim

to keep things in process, to disrupt, to keep the system in play, to set up procedures to continuously demystify the realities we create, to fight the tendency for our categories to congeal' (Lather, 1991:13).

‘Deconstruction is designated as double movement: either disordering, or disarranging, and also re-arranging’ (Phoca and Wright, 1999:47). The task of

deconstruction, as a 'strategy of displacement' (Lather, 1991:13), is to make ideology visible and to probe the complexity of contradictory meaning, desire and pleasure derivative of certain classed, gendered and raced positions.

Researching access education through auto/biography is a key interest of this project. This interest is rooted in my own auto/biography, as a student, teacher and researcher of access education. It also relates to my commitment to position access students at the centre of research on access education. It seems pointless to attempt to develop access education that claims to redress social inequalities within the academic world, without addressing the diverse backgrounds, needs, ideas and experiences of access students as a starting point and as a continual point of reference for reflexivity. A second aim then is to examine the implications of participation in access education for the lives, experiences and subjectivity/ies of access students through their written and spoken auto/biographies. Subjectivity is a central concept in this thesis denoting the ways that participants understand and identify themselves in relation to the multiple contexts in which they are positioned. The production of subjectivity is always an interactive, inconsistent and unstable process interlaced with the social, cultural and discursive. A feminist theorisation of subjectivity therefore embraces the interaction between inner and outer worlds 'in a self-reflexive analysis of the internalisation of an engendered self' (Hey, 1997: 125).

Located within the 'tradition' of access education, critical social research and feminism, this project concerns itself with issues and possibilities of social transformation and justice. A third key aim is to consider the possibilities for access education opening spaces for localised change that address social justice issues of cultural mis/recognition and structural in/equality (Fraser, 1997). I draw on Fraser's thesis that a project for social justice requires both a politics of redistribution, informed by socialist-feminist theories, and a politics of recognition, drawing on the insights of feminist post/structuralism and its tool of deconstruction.

The long-term goal of deconstructive feminism is a culture in which hierarchical gender dichotomies are replaced by networks of multiple

intersecting differences and are demassified and shifting. This goal is consistent with transformative socialist-feminist redistribution. Deconstruction opposes the sort of sedimentation or congealing of gender difference that occurs in an unjustly gendered political economy. Its utopian image of a culture in which ever-new constructions of identity and difference are freely elaborated and then swiftly deconstructed is possible, after all, only on the basis of rough social equality (Fraser, 1997:30).

It is my fourth research aim to contribute to developing collaborative approaches methodologically and pedagogically within the field of access education. I have used this research as an experimental space to practise collaborative approaches within access education and to mobilise oppositional discourses and subject positions with participants. Due to my position as a teacher and researcher within this project, I have also experimented with collaborative approaches to teaching and learning. Collaboration took place at all stages of the research, but was also limited by factors such as unequal levels of investment in, involvement in and benefit from the project. My relation to the research was markedly different from students', constraining full collaboration of the research. These issues are examined throughout the thesis, but particularly in Chapter Three, paying close attention to power relations and positionality.

The research questions guiding this thesis relate directly to the research aims above. In relation to the discursive contexts of access education I ask:

- What are the connections between critical discourses of access education and dominant discourses of widening educational participation and how do they compare? How can we understand, analyse and deconstruct these discourses in relation to the experiences of access students? How do these discourses frame and shape the experiences of and subject positions available to access students?

I ask in relation to research and auto/biography:

- What do the auto/biographies of a small group of access students reveal about dominant discourses of widening educational participation? What impact does educational participation have on the lives, relationships and

subjectivity/ies of these access students? How is subjectivity re/produced through the process of participating in the discursive field of access education?

In relation to collaborative research and pedagogy I ask:

- Is collaboration between teacher/ researcher and students/participants possible within research on access education? What positive contribution can collaborative approaches make to the field of access education?

Finally, in relation to social change and justice, I ask:

- Can access education address the cultural level of educational mis/recognition *as well as* the structural level of educational in/equality? Can it challenge dominant discourses of widening educational participation that reinforce such social injustices? Through a theory of identity as fluid, how might educational spaces be opened up to subjects that challenge identities constituted through dominant discourses and mobilise oppositional discourses and subject positions?

Organisation of the thesis

In this final section, I outline the structure of the thesis, describing the key arguments of each chapter. I should point out that a traditional literature review is purposely excluded from this thesis. My research draws on and contributes to a large range of potential fields at various points. I therefore decided that rather than a conventional literature review, it would help the reader and develop the argument to integrate key literature into the body of the thesis, outlining central ideas and conceptual tools as they emerge throughout the thesis.

Chapter Two presents the background and context for the thesis. I briefly outline the history of access education, providing the reader with an insight into its rationale. I introduce the micro and macro contexts of the research, including

local geographical contexts, an outline of the courses being studied and a description and critique of policy and politics, shaping the possibilities and limitations of the access education project. The chapter examines the discourses in operation within the field of access education and identifies the links between national politics, discourses of widening educational participation and access education. Critiquing the 'third way' project of New Labour, I consider the problems of a market approach for the policy and practice of access education, arguing that such neo-liberal approaches operate to reinforce poverty and exclusion and to reproduce unequal power relations.

Chapter Three traces my journey as a feminist researcher conducting a small-scale ethnographic study on access education. I discuss the research design in detail, exploring the methodological dilemmas emerging throughout the research process. A central theme of the chapter is the usefulness of collaborative approaches to research on access education. I consider the implications of my dual position as teacher/researcher and discuss the ways I developed the research methodology collaboratively with students/participants. Researcher and researched are positioned in the project as 'co-participants'. Although committed to conducting research that attempts to disrupt unequal power relations, this chapter considers the ways that this is not always a possibility. In reviewing my analytical approaches, I argue that analysis is a process rather than a stage in the research project, moving in and out of collaboration with co-participants.

Chapter Four places pedagogy at the centre of inquiry, arguing for the importance of collaboration to the radical project of access education. Extending the theme of collaboration to pedagogical concerns, I identify it as crucial to the development of inclusive learning. Examining critical pedagogy, co-participants engage with its critiques and the specific dilemmas we experienced while attempting to put such theory into practice. The dominant discourse of widening educational participation, which is in tension with the radical discourse of access education, has overshadowed pedagogical concerns with an overemphasis on standards and standardisation. I argue for the importance of the collaborative development of pedagogy, which includes theory *and* practice, teachers *and*

students, and which reflexively addresses difference and context while remaining committed to anticlassist, antiracist and antisexist praxis.

Chapter Five focuses on a major theme emerging from the participants' auto/biographies about feelings of intimidation and fear. I argue that although access education seeks to include marginalised groups in learning, its location in the academic world often re/positions access students as inferior to 'standard' students. The hegemonic discursive practices in operation in formal educational institutions reconstruct access subjects across and within systems of inequity such as class and gender. Discourses of selectivity reinforce such constructions and they are re-emphasised through discourses of standards and standardisation and struggles over rights to access. Access students are produced as 'equal but different' yet their difference is measured against the 'normal' ('A' level) student.

Chapter Six focuses on participants' re/presentations of their educational experiences in relation to their shifting subjectivities and subject positions. I explore the implications of educational participation in relation to the multiple discourses it presents to access students who often return to study in the desire for self-discovery. A key argument is that educational participation may generate contradictory subjectivities that cause fractures rather than closures and confusions rather than certainties. Learning may be experienced as liberating and oppressive as access students interact with new ideas that challenge past identifications and securities.

Chapter Seven considers the ways in which radical discourses are resisted within access education. I use the term 'radical discourses' to represent those discourses that attempt to challenge the dominant order and create emancipatory change. I explore this theme in relation both to my experiences as a feminist tutor and my students' experimentations with feminist subject positions. I use 'micropolitics' as an analytical tool to uncover the discursive and material struggle that occurred in attempts to develop critical and feminist praxis within the institution where my research was located. A close analysis of 'micropolitics' reveals the subtle ways that feminist subjects may be 'actively othered' by those who attempt to regulate any deviations from established social norms

through technologies of normalisation. I finally consider the possibilities of mobilising counter hegemonic discourses through the site of access education.

Chapter Eight draws the thesis together, summarising my starting points, including the key aims and research questions. It revisits the two central themes, *developing collaborative approaches* and *deconstructing the competing discourses of educational access*, highlighting the key contributions the thesis makes to theory and practice in relation to these themes. I particularly highlight the importance of collaborative approaches to understanding and developing new strategies for widening educational access. I also pay attention to the limitations of the project, and then identify areas of further research, which would usefully build on this study.

Notes for Chapter One

¹ Drawing on Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony, I use the term 'hegemonic discourses' to represent the processes and struggles by which a discourse becomes dominant at a particular moment in time. 'Discourse' signifies the different and competing sets of shared meanings that define and construct our understandings of the social world and our relationship to it.

² In this thesis, I refer to Access, with a capital 'A', when I discuss the specific Access to Higher Education programme, but I use a small 'a' in access when I am referring to an overall approach within post-compulsory education to widening participation.

³ Access education is a contested site over meaning and the radical politics I describe here is one strong strand amongst many competing and overlapping positions.

⁴ 'Praxis' represents theory that is shaped by action and grounded in the practical and the political (Lather, 1991:11-12).

⁵ As in all theoretical fields, feminist poststructuralism is plural and contains competing positions and explanations within it.

⁶ Nominalism I define as the poststructuralist tendency to reduce everything to a text, ignore the material realities of social life and to dismiss categories such as class, gender and race as mere fictions.

Chapter Two: Access/ing Education in Context

Current trends in adult education policy, theory and practice also require interrogation and caution. Stirred by the progressive tone of some New Labour language, there is a danger that rhetorical assertions about the importance of widening participation, combating social exclusion and recognising social capital, for example, take too little account of the material, gendered, racialised and ideological context in which all these initiatives are located (Thompson, 2000: 8).

Introduction

Locating this ethnography of access education is the central concern of this chapter. It is divided into two parts. In Part One, I introduce the reader to the geographical context of the study and outline the specific access courses that are at the centre of inquiry. I look closely at key policy documents to uncover competing discourses in play within the texts, particularly New Labour's Green (1998) and White (1999) papers on lifelong learning and Kennedy's influential report *Learning Works* (1997). In Part Two, I analyse the political contexts, which profoundly shape the construction of widening educational participation. I deploy 'discourse' as an analytical tool to interrogate the policy and political contexts of widening educational participation and to identify the construction of competing meanings within the project of access education. 'Discourse' is a concept developed by Foucault (1979, 1986), to 'show how knowledge can determine and define meaning, representations and reason' (Davies, Williams and Webb, 1997: 15). The notion of discourse 'interweaves power relations with language' (Mauthner and Hey, 1999: 71; Mauthner, 1998a: 41), and I use it to 'explain the working of power on behalf of specific interests and to analyse the opportunities for resistance to it' (Weedon, 1993: 41). Importantly, discourse signifies the dynamic and fluid ways that social meanings are constructed, subjectivities are re/produced and power relations are maintained and contested. The chapter begins with a brief history of access education, mapping out the earlier radical discourses of widening educational participation that carried an explicit political agenda.

PART ONE

Historical Contexts

In 1978 the Department of Education and Science invited seven local education authorities (LEAs) to participate in a pilot preparatory course leading to higher education (Fieldhouse, 1996: 73; Benn, 1996: 388). The 1978 LEA pilot schemes were aimed at non-traditional entry to higher education, and targeted individuals from ethnic minority and working class groups. By 1994, there were 1000 of these courses, 'Access to Higher Education', with over 30,000 students, most of whom were women (Fieldhouse, 1996).

Over the past decade there has been a significant change in the culture of access, resulting from its formalisation. From the period of the late 1980's to the early 1990's, 'the incorporation of Access policy-makers into the decision-making processes of the dominant agencies' significantly reshaped access developments (Diamond, 1999: 184). The arrival of the national kitemark and the consequent legitimisation of Access courses resulted in 'a mass explosion of Access courses' (*ibid.*: 186). As decision-making shifted from access practitioners to policy-makers, key concerns also shifted, from empowerment and social justice to the establishment of 'frameworks and structures to give legitimacy to the outcome of a student successfully completing an Access programme' (*ibid.*: 185).

[I]n less than a decade the most public exponents of Access were no longer the day-to-day practitioners, but those who were mainly concerned with the administration of systems and organisations' (*ibid.*).

The Open College Network (OCN) is intimately associated with Access to Higher Education and other access courses. It has struggled since the late 1970's to gain national recognition and legitimacy, and it now has achieved a national framework. Nine OCNs established the National Open College Network (NOCN) in 1987. There are now 31 OCNs across Britain, covering all of England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The NOCN represents and co-ordinates

the work of regional OCNs, and has established a role as a qualification awarding body. The majority of access courses nation-wide are OCN-validated, and many OCNs are also recognised by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) as Authorised Validating Agencies (AVAs) for Access to Higher Education courses (NOCN, 1999). Access to Higher Education is now overseen by the QAA, a board working closely with the NOCN to ensure quality and standards.

Since its beginnings, there has been a range of competing discourses in play within access education (Williams, 1997a: 42). Different social players, including politicians, access practitioners, educational managers, and access students, have struggled to re/define and control the access education agenda. In order to deconstruct such struggle and its political ramifications, I identify two analytically distinct discourses, which are currently in circulation within access education. However, as Williams (1997a: 42) points out, these two discursive positions overlap, and access practitioners may subscribe to either position (Benn and Burton, 1995).

The first, the dominant discourse of widening participation, is associated with neo-liberal politics and is most recently articulated by New Labour through their policy documents and public statements. It is located within the wider project of New Labour to reform the welfare state and regenerate the national economy and has gained a hegemonic position since 1997. However, it also has origins in the earlier split within the access movement, when some members focused on the 'A levelisation of Access' (Stowell, 1992: 172 cited in Williams, 1997a: 43) and a 'meritocratic version of access' (Williams, 1997a: 45).

The second, the discourse of access education, is associated with radical politics and represents a particularly strong strand of the access movement, which was motivated by the concern to transform higher education by placing marginalised groups at the centre of knowledge reconstruction. 'The access movement draws upon a radical approach to education which asks for a fundamental shift in the distribution of cultural capital' (Williams, 1997a: 43). There are particular pedagogical concerns embedded within this discourse that draw on critical and

feminist theory. These include: a student centred approach to teaching and learning, the negotiation with students in relation to course content and pedagogy, encouragement of students to follow their own interests, and community led organisation of access courses (Kennedy and Piette, 1991: 35). The access movement was generally practitioner led and located outside of central state sponsorship (Corrigan, 1992).

The early proponents of Access were working at the margins of their organisations and their work was seen to be peripheral to the needs of their institutions (Diamond, 1999).

Provision was designed around student needs leading to experimental approaches to the organisation of the curriculum and the construction of courses in response to the needs of local communities (Diamond, 1999: 186; Maxwell, 1996: 112).

Access education also included the organisation of courses specifically concerned with women's access to education. In 1981, the Women's Educational Centre was established in Southampton, funded by the University, the Local Education Authority, the Workers Educational Association and the Equal Opportunities Commission (Benn, 1998:44). There were five main strands within this provision (Coats, 1994: 17). The first was to bring women back to study or work after a long period of domestic responsibility, with an emphasis on confidence building, counselling, self-defence, study skills, and some academic content. The phrase 'women returners' has become a popular shorthand phrase to represent this strand of provision. Another strand was to offer courses taught by women in subjects that have been traditionally male-dominated, such as electronics and technology. There were also positive action courses such as 'Women into Management' and courses for women to update their skills before returning to their careers. Finally, there were Women's Studies courses, teaching feminist theory and a 'woman-centred' curriculum. Women's Studies had close links with the Women's Liberation Movement, and so liberation and independence for women were key aims (Benn, 1998: 43; Kennedy and Piette, 1991: 31). Although these strands still remain in access education today, they are

increasingly difficult to defend in mainstream educational institutions that claim we have entered an era of post-feminism (see Chapter Seven).

In this thesis, I do not identify access education as belonging narrowly to the body of nationally recognised Access to Higher Education courses, although such courses constitute a significant proportion of the field of access education. I use the term 'access education' partially to represent those adult educational programmes that demonstrate a serious commitment to the expansion of educational participation in British society. Additionally, I conceptualise it as a project committed to engaging groups, who have been historically and socially excluded from re/defining and producing knowledge and re/constructing theory, in participating in and contributing to ontological, epistemological, theoretical, methodological and pedagogical questions, debates and developments. Furthermore, I construct access education as a site of possibility for creating spaces for the mobilisation of counter-discourses that are collectively constructed. This conceptualisation shaped my research aim to contribute to the development of collaborative approaches to methodology and pedagogy within the field of access education. I want to reformulate the radical discourse of access education by addressing difference, complexity and contextuality and therefore asserting the impossibility of discovering one universal 'good' approach to access education.

Local Contexts

In this section I map out for the reader the specific location and context of the research. All names of places and people have been changed to maintain anonymity. As a case study, my research focused specifically on one Further Education College, which I will refer to as 'Ford' College. The case study researcher:

typically *observes* the characteristics of an individual unit - a child, a clique, a school or a community. The purpose of such observation is to probe deeply and to analyse intensely the multifarious phenomena that constitute the life cycle of the unit with a view to establishing generalisations about the wider population to which that unit belongs (Cohen and Manion, 1985: 120, original emphasis).

The case study drawing on ethnographic methods often involves participant observation as a key characteristic (Willis, 1981; Cohen and Manion, 1985). This is true of my research. I also draw on a body of feminist work focusing on participants' experiences of particular institutions (Reay, 1998; Skeggs, 1997; Hey, 1997; Epstein, 1991, 1993). Such work is concerned with engaging the nuanced detail of the particular case through paying close attention to the varied and interconnected contexts that profoundly shape and complexify the dynamics of the research focus.

At 'Ford' College I was employed as a lecturer within the School of Adult Community Education, enabling me to carry out participant observation. 'Ford' College consists of two centres, and I was based across both, with an office allocated to me at each site. The college sites are situated in two different local councils, 'Woodley Borough' and 'Riverside District Council', within one large county council. The two centres are close enough that students often attend classes at both, travelling daily between the sites.

Woodley Borough is next to extensive woodlands on the boundaries of a metropolis. A river runs picturesquely through the area. It has a population of about 81,000 and is controlled by the Conservative Party. The constituency is predominately English white upper-working and middle class, although this is gradually changing as more ethnic minority groups begin to move into the area from the city. Its closer proximity to the city has enabled many groups from Black, Turkish and Asian communities to register at Ford College and participate in its programmes. However, this has affected younger cohorts of the student population much more significantly than the adult cohorts that I researched. The 1995 annual employment census estimated that there were some 24,200 jobs in the borough, and over 75% of employment in the service sector. Two thirds of the jobs in Woodley Borough are full-time; women take 80% of the part-time jobs. The current unemployment rate is one of the highest in the county, containing significantly higher rates of long-term unemployment.

Riverside District Council boasts a rich natural and built heritage in the combination of market towns and village settlements and is predominately rural. The population of the district is approximately 124,000, half of whom reside in the district's five main towns and the other half in over 100 villages and hamlets across the district. 'Ford' College is in one of the district's historical towns, controlled by the Conservative Party, and is scenically situated opposite the river. 81% of students in the district remain in the education system after year 11. The district is generally prosperous with higher than average earnings and most of the workforce are in managerial, skilled and technical jobs and are employed full-time. The district council has one of the lowest rates of unemployment in the county. Many of the women I researched were consequently full-time housewives supported by a 'breadwinner' husband.

As a full-time lecturer at Ford College my key role was 'Return to Study Programme Manager', a post I held for just over one academic year (August 1997 - October 1998). I was responsible for organising the Return to Study programme at both sites, whereas the Access to Higher Education programme was organised by a different tutor at each centre. Before taking this post, I was a student myself at Ford College on the 'City and Guilds 7306 Adult and Further Education Teacher's Training' course and I carried out my teaching practice at the College, on 'A' level Sociology and Return to Study (September 1996-June 1997).

In 1998 I was awarded a full-time ESRC studentship to complete my doctoral studies and I resigned from my permanent post at the College. I continued to teach part-time on Return to Study, Access to Higher Education (Qualitative Research Methods) and Women's Studies. These courses all shared the goals of access education to a varying degree, but each was differently organised (see figure 2.A below).

Return to Study

A lecturer at the College created Return to Study five years before my own presence there. Her idea was to provide adults over the age of 21 with a flexible

programme that emphasised the building of self-confidence and the key skills required for studying and learning. The course consists of five units validated by the Open College Network. These 'free-standing' units¹ include 'Foundation to Learning', 'Study Skills', 'Personal Efficacy', 'Analytical Skills' and 'Job Seeking and Career Development'. Students, depending on the work that they produce, may gain either a Level One² or Level Two³ certificate at the end of their course.

Course Title	Course Level	Course description	Course site	Mode of study	Progression Routes
Return to Study (Year One)	1/2	A first step back into learning, building study skills, self-reflection, self-confidence	Woodley and Riverside	Part/time (one 2 hour session per week plus the option nine hours extra tuition per week)	The Learning Pathway, Access to HE, GCSE's or 'A' levels
The Learning Pathway: A Part of the Return to Study Programme	2/3	Emphasis on expanding academic skills, developing critical thinking and analysis	Woodley and Riverside	Part/time (Same as Return to Study-Year One)	Access to HE, 'A' Levels, Higher Education
Access to Higher Education	2/3	Emphasis on preparation for entry to degree level study	Woodley and Riverside	Part/time and Full/time	Higher Education
Women's Studies	2/3	Emphasis on critical thinking and analysis; available as an option on Return to Study, the Learning Pathway and Access to HE	Woodley	Part-time (one 3 hour taught class per week)	Access to Higher Education or Higher Education

Figure 2.A: Access Courses at Ford College

Return to Study students, with the support of a tutor, compile a programme suited to their own individual needs and goals upon entry to the programme. Their programme plan is revisited throughout the year during personal tutorials, a key part of the Return to Study programme. Students are able to enter the programme at any time during the academic year, because each unit is free-standing. They are also offered the option to study from a distance, attendance

on the 2-hour weekly sessions not being mandatory. More than two thirds of students are women; most are white and from working-class backgrounds. The course fee is £14 per academic year and includes up to 9 hours per week free tuition on GCSEs, 'A' levels, Women's Studies, Languages, Basic Literacy and Numeracy and various City and Guilds courses. All Return to Study students therefore are following a different learning pathway according to their level of confidence and skill; some use Return to Study as a Basic Skills course, others as an access course into degree level study and others for a foundation course to Access to High Education.

Access to Higher Education

The Access to Higher Education programme targets adults aged 21 and over without formal qualifications. It is validated by the Open College Network at Level Two and Level Three⁴. The programme is semi-modularised, with students building up different combinations of subjects. There is an option between following either a Science pathway or 'Non-Science' pathway. Subjects offered on the programme include: Physics, Chemistry, Human Physiology and Health, Biology, Environment and Science, Geography, Sociology, Women's Studies, Research Methods⁵, English Literature, History, Economics and Law. An aim of the programme is to offer access students as much flexibility as possible. Students may choose to study full time over one year or part time over two to three years, may study day or evenings and may attend classes across both College sites. About two thirds of the student body are women and most students are white. There is a mixture of working-class and middle-class students, reflecting the constituencies of the two local boroughs.

The emphasis of the programme is on the preparation of students for higher education, as well as building levels of self-confidence. Students are encouraged to learn the dominant canons and theories of the relevant academic field in anticipation for the pressure of degree-level study. The radical discourses of the Access movement have not penetrated the programme provided at 'Ford' College. For example, 'social justice', 'social transformation' and 'student empowerment' are absent terms. The theories of 'critical pedagogy' are unknown

to my colleagues, and they were not interested in discussing such ideas in the staffroom (see Chapter Four and Chapter Seven). Moreover students are not explicitly exposed to critiques of dominant discourses, and the language of the market has become embedded in the Access programme. I therefore became motivated and concerned to deconstruct, with students, the dominant discourses in circulation within the Access to HE programme. I had two opportunities to pursue this goal. First while I taught the Research Methods course on Access to HE for one term (Spring 1998/1999). As Return to Study Programme Manager, the opportunity also posed itself through my role in curriculum development.

The Learning Pathway and Women's Studies

Over my two years at 'Ford' College, I energetically created and organised two new Open College Network-validated courses, which expanded on the Return to Study and Access to Higher Education programmes. My rationale for devising these courses was to:

1. expand opportunities for those excluded from higher education in the local community to take part in higher level study
2. encourage students to think critically
3. consider and deconstruct with students dominant discourses in operation in the local community
4. put class, ethnicity and gender at the centre of analysis
5. develop pedagogical approaches that retain a politics of difference while also remaining committed to anti(hetero)sexist and antiracist practices.

Building on the Return to Study programme by offering students a second year at Level Two/Level Three, I created *The Learning Pathway; A Part of the Return to Study Programme*, the title and the course inspired by the Kennedy Report (Kennedy, 1997). The course consists of four units: 'Learner Development', 'Changing Ideas, Changing Images', 'Our Changing Selves' and 'Work and Society'. In creating the programme, I wanted to provide a course that stimulated critical thinking, challenged hegemonic discourses, particularly around class, gender, 'race', and sexuality and employed critical pedagogical approaches.

I also organised an Open College Network-validated Women's Studies course offered as an additional option to women Return to Study and Access to Higher Education students. My idea was to provide an introductory course to feminist theory and to place gender relations at the centre of analysis. I felt a Women's Studies course would open up spaces for counter-hegemonic discourses, critical thinking and analysis and the exploration of the connections between personal experience, knowledge and theory. The course was inspired and based upon an Open College Network Women's Studies course that I externally moderated. I asked the programme creator/organiser how she would feel if I used her course as a basis to set up a similar course at Ford College. She was delighted by the idea, expressing that this signified for her what feminism was about; the sharing of knowledge to expand ideas that contribute to the general goals of feminism.

The course consists of four units: 'Women's Studies: Basic Concepts', 'Women's History', 'Women, Family and Work' and 'Research Project'. Students may pass at either Level Two or Level Three and the final unit involves the production of their own research project with tutor guidance. The course requires students to attend a three-hour weekly session and to produce coursework following the assessment criteria as set in the validation document.

External Moderation

Throughout the period of conducting the research, I also externally moderated various access courses at different colleges including Return to Learn, Women's Studies, Access to Cultural Studies, Pre-Access, Personal Development and Enrichment and Essential Skills. As an external moderator, I represent a local Open College Network, and am responsible for externally verifying the courses I am assigned to, in terms of quality, standards, assessment, student satisfaction, recruitment and retention and appropriate pedagogy. During my moderation visits, I examine samples of student work to ensure that coursework and exams are set and assessed according to the criteria of the validation documents, that marking is fair and consistent and that feedback is clear, didactic and constructive. On visits I also confer with the team of tutors and meet with the

group of students on the course. At the end of the academic year, I submit to the Open College Network an annual report based on these areas of examination. In terms of my research, I always made entries in my research diary after moderation visits and kept a record of reports to refer to if needed in my research⁶.

Policy Contexts

My research coincides with burgeoning policy developments in the area of widening educational participation. The post-compulsory education sector is currently undergoing dramatic changes generated by the policy developments of the New Labour government. Access education has itself been centralised by the Government's appointment of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education to oversee its operations, with a particular focus on standards. I would argue that the discourse of 'widening educational participation' has overtaken, and to some extent replaced, discourses of access education (Sand, 1998). Access to Higher Education courses still exist, however, these have become increasingly vocationalised, instrumentally oriented and utilitarian, lacking an explicit political agenda (Barr, 1999). Moreover, such courses are now a smaller part of the larger project for 'lifelong learning' and widening educational participation.

In this section, I describe the key policy texts emerging from the concern to widen educational participation.

Learning Works

Education must be at the heart of any inspired project for regeneration in Britain. It should be a springboard for the revitalisation that our communities so urgently need. However, in all the political debates, it is the economic rationale for increasing participation in education which has been paramount. Prosperity depends upon there being a vibrant economy, but an economy which regards its own success as the highest good is a dangerous one. Justice and equity must also have their claim upon the arguments for educational growth. In a social landscape where there is a growing gulf between those who have and those who have not, the importance of social cohesion cannot be ignored (Kennedy, 1997:5-6).

The Widening Participation Committee was set up by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) in December 1994, chaired by Helena Kennedy QC, to provide advice on promoting access to further education for those who 'do not participate in education and training, but who could benefit from it' (Kennedy, 1997: iii). The final report produced by the Committee represented a powerful message to the government about the importance of widening educational participation, not only for the purpose of regenerating the national economy, but also on the moral and humanitarian principle of social equity and justice. The report revitalises the discourse characteristic of the early access movement, although it creates a 'shift from the terminology of 'access' to that of 'widening participation' (Sand, 1998: 22).

The report argues that the competitive culture of the further education sector is a barrier to the promotion of access, and that providers need to collaborate rather than to compete through 'strategic partnerships' (Kennedy, 1997: 4). The report also argues for the redistribution of public resources 'towards those with less success in earlier learning, moving towards equity of funding in post-16 education' (*ibid.*:13). Further recommendations include use of lottery money to fund access initiatives, encouraging employers to invest in educational projects on behalf of their employees, reforming funding to directly address socio-economic deprivation and creating funding for childcare. The report proposes a lifetime entitlement to education up to level 3 for all young people and those who are 'socially and economically deprived' and the creation of a 'new learning pathway', to provide 'a route through the wide range of opportunities in further education for adults' (Kennedy, 1996: 8). The concept of the new learning pathway proposes innovative educational programmes that provide a combination of vocational, academic and critical education within a flexible framework of provision that meets the diverse needs of access students from different backgrounds. Importantly, the new learning pathway concept recognises the valuable, alternative and highly creative contributions of many further education practitioners committed to widening educational participation. The report therefore publicly supports the non-conventional practices of access teachers, attempting to stretch such practices to all corners of the FE sector.

Progressively, the report reclaims redistribution as a necessary strategy for educational inclusion and represents a 'passionate advocate for under-represented groups' (Sand, 1998: 22).

The Learning Age

Following the Kennedy report, the government produced the Green paper entitled *The Learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain* (DfEE, 1998). The paper fails to implement the proposals made in the Kennedy report, although it picks up on much of its progressive rhetoric in the introductory paragraphs. However, the key proposals made by the widening participation committee are largely overlooked, particularly in terms of collaboration, raising entitlement of free education to level 3, redistribution of resources to the poorest sectors of society and the concept of new learning pathways.

The Learning Age instead emphasises the links between education and employment and the benefit of gaining skills to 'increase earning power' (Sand, 1998: 26). The two key proposals of the document are Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) and the University for Industry (Ufi). The government argues the ILAs will encourage individual investment in learning, allowing people to 'take control of their learning'. Underpinning this proposal is the assertion that the responsibility for learning should be shared, by the state, by individuals and by employers.

The University for Industry, the government claims, will

put the UK ahead of the rest of the world in using new technology to improve learning and skills...It will act as the hub of a brand new learning network, using modern communication technologies to link businesses and individuals to cost effective, accessible and flexible education and training (DfEE, 1998a).

Strategies to be adopted by the Ufi are outlined as:

- The use of television with its potential to enter 99% of homes

- local learning centres
- the use of technology for home study
- enable people to learn at home through the internet,
- the reduction of costs by creating a mass market for learning products
- a national freephone helpline offering advice about courses and learning.

Aimed at the general public, the government produced a small booklet outlining their key proposals and requesting feedback through a small-attached questionnaire (DfEE, February 1998 booklet). Ordering a bulk of these booklets, I disseminated them to students and devoted one session with each student group I taught in 1998, outlining the government's *Learning Age* document and then facilitating a feedback session. Students, in small groups, listed their views on flipchart paper, which they then shared with the rest of the class. Groups of students made the following points during these feedback sessions:

This is just another 'quick fix' to get people back into work.

There will not be equal opportunity in education if people have to save up for their education - e.g. older people no longer working, families on low income.

Employers may be reluctant to send employees for training because:

- 1. Will employees move to another job once trained?*
- 2. Who does their jobs while they're being trained?*

(Access to HE students, 1998)

Many people are scared of new technology and this is a huge barrier for mature people.

Study at home will reinforce feelings of isolation. Learning in groups cannot be replaced - interaction, sharing and collaboration are very valuable to learning!

The government should set up learning programmes in local schools and in the community for adults.

(Return to Study students, 1998)

A Return to Study student wrote the following in her student diary after our session on *The Learning Age*:

It is all very well for the Government to determine situations for us but what about the personal side of learning? We all learn from each other and we all make mistakes so how can learning through the Internet really teach us anything? We would become isolated and miss the individual attention that some of us require. We have tried for so long to train people for better prospects but now the idea of the Individual Learning Accounts is to encourage employers to invest in people. This means that employers may lose their 'average' staff and be solely interested in upper management training. Examples of how difficult it is going to be for people are already apparent. Relating to class discussion, a student's husband couldn't decide which course to take on the Internet and while running up the phone bill realised that whatever he chose was going to cost him a minimum of £300. How can ordinary people afford this? Another example is a friend's husband that couldn't understand leaflets advertising information, so he gave in and didn't bother. All this boils down to bad guidance and teaching. An example of how contact with people is of no doubt good for us can be seen by another student's story. Her daughter's teacher was constantly picking on a pupil and sending him out of the class whenever she felt like it. To sum up, the other pupils were shocked at what she was doing and said nothing. When she later explained it had all been a test they were all relieved. The next question she put to them was "why didn't you stick up for him"? Tell me now if you connected to the Internet would it teach you morals and respect that could be taught here? I know the Government is aiming at skills training but I have learnt to respect myself since I started college, surely technology can't teach us things like that. The Government might want this country to be ahead in the learning and technology stakes but where does it leave our morals? Frankly I think its all a lot of balderdash and much prefer the way I am learning. I need the group

discussion, I need the related experiences and most of all I need the encouragement that my computer can't give me (Vanessa, student diary, 29 April 1998).

Vanessa's diary entry and the students' comments above highlight the concerns of many adults when contemplating a return to education. These students point to group learning and sharing ideas and experiences as central to access education. The relationship between the tutor and students, their accounts suggest, cannot be replaced by distance learning through computer technology (a central idea of the University for Industry). Against the discourse of the policy, students' accounts place guidance, classroom teaching and social interaction as key characteristics of effective strategies for widening educational participation.

Learning to Succeed

Following the Green paper, the Government produced a white paper of 'its vision of the learning age', entitled *Learning to Succeed: a new framework for post-16 learning* (DfEE, June 1999). The concern to widen educational participation is explicitly connected to the government's welfare to work programmes in this document (DfEE, 1999:62). Policies put into place by the New Right, which actively block the unemployed and unpaid workers from accessing higher levels of education, remain in place and unchallenged:

Unemployed people and others not in employment, can upgrade their skills through three main ways:

- Through access to further education without having to pay fees, and undertaking study of their own choice. *Those who are claiming Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) may not study, however, for more than 16 guided hours a week and they may remain subject to the availability for work conditions of JSA.* This is also the route available for those on New Deal for Lone Parents, New Deal for Partners of the Unemployed, and the New Deal for People with Disabilities;
- People on New Deal for 18-24 year olds and those over 25 have access to further education and training on a full-time basis on the advice of Personal Advisors *where this is thought the best way of overcoming barriers to re-entering the labour market.* This is paid for under contract from the Employment Service from New Deal funds; and

- Through TEC funded work-based learning for adults, *which provides basic and occupational skills training for unemployed people over the age of 25* (DfEE, 1999:62, emphasis added).

Such policy makes participation on Access to Higher Education courses, and other academic-oriented access education, virtually impossible for individuals experiencing economic marginalisation through unemployment or unpaid work⁷.

Shelley: It's like if you want to do computers or basic reading, you can do that for nothing, but if you want to do something like counselling you've got to pay. Already its streaming us, isn't it into what we can be.

Kate: And really, basically, the government's programming us (Women's Studies recorded group discussion, 1998).

Shelley and Kate recognise that there are particular areas of non-traditional educational participation endorsed and supported by government policy, and these areas are at the lower levels of formal education. Their interchange reveals their awareness that opportunities are being severely constrained by the same policy that claims to be about creating inclusion and equality. The emphasis of policy lies entirely on basic skills, computer literacy and work-based skills. It is clear the government is not referring to widening access to critical learning or higher education generally, unless the individual can support such participation through her/his own independent means, for example by juggling employment and study. The primary way the government sets out to support widening access for adults is through the two key proposals introduced in *The Learning Age* green paper (DfEE, 1998a), the Individual Learning Accounts and the University for Industry (DfEE, 1999:55).

In *Learning to Succeed*, a significant change to the current system lies in the creation of the Learning Skills Council, with responsibility for funding, advising government regarding national learning targets, developing community learning provision and providing information, advice and guidance to adults. The Learning Skills Council consists of a varied body of membership, giving employers 'unprecedented influence over the education system' (DfEE, 1999:10):

Employers will form the largest single group and will, directly influence a far wider range of post-16 provision, than they do now, covering academic as well as vocational education. This will deliver a strong customer influence in the new arrangements and ensure that the business sector continues to have a significant say about provision (DfEE, 1999: 24).

This document enshrines the language of the market in national policy on widening access and firmly shifts the discourse from access to *higher* education, a key focus of the access movement, to access to *further* education. Indeed, Access to Higher Education courses are not mentioned once in the document, nor are the National Open College Network, despite the significant roles both have played in widening educational participation. Rather, NVQs (National Vocational Qualifications) are the focal point. The document proposes that the Qualification and Curriculum Authority, with National Training Organisations, will ensure that NVQs are

based on standards which reflect the modern requirements of industry, while having a structure which allows more flexibility to better support the operations of individual firms' (DfEE, 1999:48).

This sentence is revealing of the discourse privileged throughout the policy document, with key words and phrases being 'industry', 'business', 'employers', 'needs of local labour markets', 'customer needs', 'client groups' and 'independence'.

PART TWO

Political contexts

The main purpose of Part Two is to provide an outline and analysis of the political contexts that have shaped and influenced the policy and practice of widening educational participation. After tracing the impact of the New Right on education generally and the move towards the marketisation of education, which has significant implications for access education, I critique, from a feminist perspective, 'the third way' or New Labour approach to widening educational access. I highlight the dangers of this approach for the precise groups that access education policy seeks to target, making explicit the links between initiatives to widen participation and the project to 'reform' the welfare state.

The significance of examining the political

Education policy and practice cannot be detached from the wider socio-political context (Apple, 1996). Changes within education must be located within the historical, political and cultural dynamics which shape experiences of learning both socially and individually. British (Bowe and Ball, 1992; Johnson, 1991) and American (Apple, 1996; Aronowitz and Giroux, 1994) education theorists have contextualised and conceptualised educational change in relation to the wider New Right movement. Such work was published before the election of New Labour into government, and theory must take into account the constant change that is characteristic of our time. Such characteristic change offers some optimism, despite the evident influence of New Right ideology on popular (and, more recently, New Labour) thinking. Apple (1996) strongly argues that we must study these changes carefully, and investigate seriously the dynamics of power and the development of strategic politics attached to the New Right movement. He suggests convincingly that we can learn from the success of the New Right, while dismissing ideas merely because they are right wing does nothing to further the cause of social transformation for justice and liberation. He demonstrates that dismissive attitudes may even push communities, for

example concerned parents, to the extreme right, in the search for a voice (Apple, 1996: 56-59). We must take note of the shaping of the hegemony of the New Right, in order to understand the ways that hegemony is formed, resisted and countered.

The Power of the New Right

Since 1979, the increasing power of the New Right in the educational context has been apparent, explained as part of the failure of the left to be a 'really educative movement creating the knowledges to sustain its politics' (Johnson, 1991: 32). Much of the early 60's and 70's sociological critique of schooling as a mechanism of socio-cultural reproduction played into the hands of the New Right due to its pessimism and negativity (*ibid.*). Ken Jones (1989) provides further explanations; the Left's lack of social influence on the power of political forces and traditions, as well as the very success of the Left to force previously marginal issues onto the political agenda and to more general social attention (Jones, 1989: 34). Unfortunately, 'these achievements were not accompanied by the presentation of an 'all-round' political programme, that addressed general issues of democracy or economic strategy' (*ibid.*). As the Left became increasingly pessimistic about the educational system, the Right gained the confidence of the public through a discourse that appealed highly to popular thinking. The Right strategically capitalised on media support to popularise its ideological positions.

[The Right] has identified targets for attack and elaborated ideological themes with a clear sense of the ideas that relate to the particular, well-rooted national attitudes: the exploitation of racist themes is a case in point. By contrast, the left and social democracy lack a well-developed economic programme, a clear sense of what has to change in British society, and an image of the kind of society they each want to create (Jones, 1989: 35).

Although the British tendency to exercise a suspicious attitude towards intellectualism and theory has a long history (*ibid.*), such attitudes were regenerated and popularised, while right wing politicians and educators re-emphasised the value of common sense. The public generally sympathised with the right wing view of skills as 'cashable assets' and as more important than

'education for education's sake' or 'the transformation of the self and others by learning' (Johnson, 1991: 32).

A Two-Faced Politics

As the gap grows between the rich and the poor (Lothian Anti Poverty Alliance, 2001) and the world of work becomes increasingly characterised by de-regulation, casualisation, racialisation and feminisation (Thompson, 2000:1), anxieties are raised about individual and collective futures, stability and identities. The New Right, aware of such anxieties, has built a movement as both a response to and a stirring up of common sense hopes and fears. The New Right movement consists of two discursive strands, apparently discordant, yet, as Jones argues, surprisingly compatible (Jones, 1989).

Neo-Conservatism nostalgically looks backwards, to the 'strong nation that England once was', premised on the traditional family and British values. In this model, movements such as feminism, antiracism and anti(hetero)sexism are seen as the evils at the root of a national crisis. As New Right politicians in the 1970's and 80's positioned themselves in opposition to the 'damaging' practices of local educational authorities, teachers and intellectuals were characterised as instigators of a reverse racism against the white English population. Antiracists were constructed through New Right discourse as destructive to British culture, robbing Britain of its 'true' history and the British of their ('superior') identity, and dangerously discriminating in favour of 'the other'. British identity was defined in opposition to 'the other'; the Black population was constructed as the enemy through the rhetoric and policy of the New Right.

[R]ace has provided a vocabulary in which right-wing intellectuals and politicians can speak to the 'nation' about what it is, and what is happening to it, and through the medium of race they can interpret some of the central experiences of the times (Jones, 1989: 53).

Antiracist education demanded that white British people re-evaluate their past, allegedly transforming schools and colleges into 'political, not educational'

institutions (*ibid.*: 53-54). The Right argued that the future of the system needed to be guided not by politics but by the consumer (*ibid.*: 47).

Through a series of popularised and sometimes sophisticated strategies to re-invest in nation and family, the New Right gained a powerfully hegemonic position over all other discourses. Such strategic developments led to the establishment of the National Curriculum and the ongoing de-skilling of teachers as well as lecturers in further education. Teachers' judgement no longer to be trusted, training was to be apprentice-based rather than academically based, as the world of academia was now seen as a corrupting force (*ibid.*). While New Right politicians spoke of decentralisation and diffusion of power, the systematic disengagement of teachers from curriculum and pedagogical development have implicitly strengthened state control over education and undermined professional action, decision-making and judgement. This has touched post-compulsory education as profoundly as schooling.

On the other hand, the second strand of New Right thinking, Neo-Liberalism, prefers a society without strong state presence. The emphasis of Neo-Liberalism lies on individual freedom, which can be realised through a free market, regarded as the guiding light to democracy. Neo-Conservatism and Neo-Liberalism appear to be contradictory, however, Ken Jones (1989) argues that the dual strands are remarkably compatible. With the rise of the Soviet Union militarily and the defeats of the West in South-East Asia, the compatibility of the two strands is rooted in the insecurity beginning the decade after 1968 (*ibid.*: 33). Politically, due largely to the successes of the Left, there was increasing conflict in Western societies with the students' movements and the worker's strikes (*ibid.*). This period also experienced economic instability with the rise in oil prices, the collapse of currency stability and the mid 1970's recession. Neo-Liberals placed education at the centre of economic crisis, placing blame and responsibility on individual institutions, teachers and students for all economic problems. Again, Left-wing local governments and teachers were attacked, held responsible for declining standards by placing an over-emphasis on politics, regarded as 'fanatical devotees of progressive education' (Jones, 1989: 43) and are still being portrayed as obsessive about inequalities (Giddens, 1998: 100).

Solutions were seen in the creation of a competitive educational market. The logic was to increase competition between educational institutions, teachers, as well as between students themselves, thereby creating the conditions, which would supposedly foster motivation for self-improvement. The culture of competition was regarded as an ideal, both institutionally and individually. This was a neo-Darwinist approach to educational theory; the idea being that increasing competition between individuals will 'naturally' promote success and achievement. Survival of the fittest is constructed as a natural phenomenon as is social inequality. Therefore, those who were not successful had failed only due to their own ineffectiveness; they were intrinsically flawed individuals, lazy, weak, unmotivated and/or naturally unintelligent. Such individuals were destined to become troublemakers in society; they were to be the next generation of 'long-term unemployed'. The finger, therefore, was clearly pointed at failed individual students and teachers; the logic being without failure at school, we would simply not have an unemployment problem (Apple, 1996: 69).

The 'philosophic conservatism' and modernising goals (Giddens, 1998) of New Labour fit into the New Right discourse; hence the focus on widening educational participation and lifelong learning. Ken Jones, for example, argues that the Prime Minister's passion for education stems from the 'logic of neo-liberal globalisation' and from Blair's absolute acceptance of the marketplace (Jones, 1999: 238). However, there are marked differences in the ways that the globalised market is understood within New Labour discourse. New Labour, for example, 'aims vigorously to police and regulate a system in which market forces now play a dynamic role' (*ibid.*) hence an emphasis on standards and standardisation, a theme I will explore in greater detail in Chapter Four. Also, New Labour aims to create a 'culture of responsibility', an idea manifested in policy initiatives such as the New Deal. Education and training for literacy, key skills and responsible citizenship is conceptualised within this discourse as a key solution to the problem of global competitiveness. Lifelong learning is positioned as central to a national strategy for economic stability. Through the normalising technologies of formal education, 'non-standard' students can be shaped into the 'good' citizens required for a strong British nation. Social

exclusion, in this model, is a threat to the Nation, weakening the labour market and 'our' competitive position against the rest of the world.

So far as New Labour is concerned, academia is expected to help deliver Tony Blair's conviction that 'education is the best economic policy we have' (Ecclestone, 1999). It must also contribute to New Labour's related vision that people in 'the most disadvantaged and economically deprived communities' can be part of 'the solution to rebuilding those communities', by way of a 'civic revival' in 'participative democracy...confidence in citizenship' and in the 'survival of democracy itself' (Blunkett, 2000 cited in Thompson, 2000: 3).

New Labour and 'the Third Way'

New Labour has voiced clearly its vision of a 'learning society', focusing much of its rhetorical energies on education. Much of the exploding policy development in the educational arena, particularly in relation to widening participation, must be located in the larger project of the reformation of the Welfare State. The Prime Minister, suggesting a new 'third way politics', is intent on 'modernising' the welfare system, thereby creating a society of 'responsible' citizens. From this perspective, the Welfare State has been negatively perceived as creating a culture of dependency; producing generations of individuals on benefits who are unable to motivate and engage themselves with the work ethic. Situations of 'moral hazard', it is argued, have been created by the Welfare State, which has laid an overemphasis on security rather than risk (Giddens, 1998). The term 'moral hazard' has been borrowed from private insurance jargon, and means that people use insurance protection to alter their behaviour. Anthony Giddens, intellectual advisor of Tony Blair, extends the concept to a critique of welfare benefits, which he argues have altered people's understandings of 'normal' behaviour. This has supposedly manifested in individuals' increased tendencies to apply for social assistance, excuse themselves from work for alleged health reasons and to avoid active job seeking (*ibid.*: 115).

Such a critique of the Welfare State denies a history of institutional classism, colonialism, racism, and (hetero)sexism and structural inequalities that have caused the prevalence of poverty and unemployment in (and outside of) Britain. It ignores the neo-colonialist strands of contemporary British culture that operate to re/position heterogeneous marginalised groups as a threat to 'the Nation' and fails to make crucial links between poverty and the dominance of Western capitalism. It shifts the emphasis from social injustice and unequal power relations to 'failure' of traditional labour policies and approaches. The rich critiques of the traditional left are abandoned as ineffective and misguided, instead of developing new approaches, which address the complexity and diversity of social, economic and cultural inequity. Overemphasis is placed on the ideal of individual responsibility, 'healthy' competition and independence, while values such as community relations and social justice are de-emphasised. A policy of 'equality of worth', rather than equality of opportunity or equality of outcome, is prioritised over left-wing failed projects, which 'make the mistake of giving 'something for nothing'. Tony Blair's vision is a system whereby citizens 'rise according to their potential and talent, not privilege or class' (Blair quoted in White, 28 September 1999). A meritocratic model is adopted with the economic and social habits of a United States style free market at the centre of New Labour's inspiration. Individuals are expected to capitalise on policies such as the New Deal in order to improve their life chances; the government will only give a helping hand if the individual proves to be motivated to help themselves (Sherman, 1999). Maintaining the New Right understanding of poverty and unemployment, social problems are individualised, constructing antiracist and antisexist approaches as romantic and idealistic, but hugely unrealistic, misguided and even damaging.

The market has been identified within this framework as the solution to this 'culture of dependence'. Minimising the role of the State in the arena of education, health and social security is the goal, while slowly weaning individuals off of their 'dependence on the 'free ride' provided by the arm of the Welfare State. Education and the National Health Service will slowly be replaced or supplemented by private enterprise, with experts in business moving in to solve the inadequacies of a publicly run education and health sector

(Carvel, 1999). However, just as the New Right was Janus-faced, so is the Third Way. Modernisation and conservatism are regarded as compatible guidelines for a democratic future (Giddens, 1998: 68). While, decentralisation is seen as a priority, so is the role of the State in maintaining moral standards.

Reinventing government certainly sometimes means adopting market-based solutions. But it also should mean reasserting the effectiveness of government in the face of markets (*ibid.*: 75).

Anthony Giddens defines equality as inclusion and inequality as exclusion (Giddens, 1998: 102). He refers to inclusion as citizenship; the civil and political rights and responsibilities of all members of society. He includes in his definition opportunities and involvement in 'public space', and claims work and education to be two main contexts of opportunity (*ibid.*: 103). Social exclusion he conceptualises as a dual process; in contemporary society there are two marked forms of exclusion, those at the bottom, cut off from mainstream opportunities, and 'voluntary exclusion', the withdrawal of affluent groups from public institutions (*ibid.*). He recognises that exclusion of the wealthiest and the poorest go hand-in-hand; therefore limiting voluntary exclusion is central to creating a more inclusive society.

This 'third way' analysis is important, although New Labour policy rejects traditional Labour's ideas of redistribution and therefore 'fails to address the need for a new approach to wealth creation that might be the basis of an alternative approach to resourcing inclusion' (Young, 1999: 214). Giddens leaves convenient gaps in his analysis, which make it easy to ignore the very problems raised. For example, his analysis of the interdependence of the dual processes of exclusion, does not extend to recognition of the links between the poverty cycle and the wealth cycle (*ibid.*: 213). Policy targets exclusion at the bottom, failing to follow through the crucial analyses of exclusion, presented by Giddens, by tackling voluntary exclusion. Strategy is focused on making small amounts of additional resources available through policies such as Education Action Zones, but such initiatives depend on voluntary business support locally and self-help (*ibid.*). Power and Whitty point out that some of the zone initiatives are based on 'a deficit model of local communities and 'problem' parents and children', having

the potential 'to pathologize rather than to empower, to exclude rather than to include' (1999: 544). With a rhetorical emphasis on 'equality of worth', New Labour revitalises the ideal of meritocracy as the key to social inclusion and equality of opportunity.

As Professor Taylor-Goobi states:

Government policies emphasise opportunities. New Labour says those who fail to take those opportunities and make their own provisions are punished, by losing benefits. But this hits those who come from the poorest backgrounds the hardest' (Taylor-Gooby, 1999).

The despair stemming from having limited opportunities is illustrated by Greg's words, a working-class student:

I used to think - I'm just useless at this and I'm just useless at that - but the reason was...I didn't want to be a decorator, I didn't want to be on building sites, that was the reason, not because I was useless (Greg, Return to Study recorded group discussion, 1998).

There are serious problems with the concept of meritocracy, based on the discourse of equality of worth. Inclusion as the signifier for equality, with no attempt to acknowledge or change structural inequality, translates into a greater exploitation of human capital. This concept of social inclusion is based upon assumptions, which have roots in a colonial, neo-colonial and racist ideology. In our colonial past, the white colonialist set out to 'civilise' the natives in the name of 'progress' and assimilation into a 'superior' culture. The discourse of widening educational participation, particularly as articulated by New Labour, assumes such paternalistic, racist and classist postures of drawing 'the excluded' into the superior 'enterprise culture' and 'risk society'.

Investment in human capital is a key theme of the third way, the emphasis shifted from security to risk, with the conclusion that the universal welfare state is no longer appropriate. Giddens (1998) proposes a replacement of the welfare state with 'the social investment state'. Rather than provide social security, the

state invests in individuals by encouraging them to take risks, for example abandon benefits for work. However, I agree with Professor Taylor-Gooby (1999) when he concludes from statistics that

[r]isk society is an individualist idea which fails to see there are entire groups with difficulties in finding and keeping work' (*ibid.*).

The emphasis of third way politics, similar to the New Right, is placed on competition and the generation of wealth (Giddens, 1998: 99). The State's primary role is to invest in human capital in order to develop an entrepreneurial culture and a 'society of risk takers' (*ibid.*: 100). Replacing the left's project of wealth redistribution, the new social democrats prioritise the 'cultivation of human potential' (*ibid.*: 101). The Welfare State is seen as undemocratic, because it 'depends on top-down distribution of benefits' and fails to provide the 'space for civil liberty' (*ibid.*: 112-113). The focus has shifted from the left's emphasis on human emancipation to New Labour's intent to emancipate human skill and talent.

And all around us is the challenge of change. The challenge is how? The answer is people. The future is people. The liberation of human potential not just as workers but as citizens. People are born with talent and everywhere it is in chains. Fail to develop the talents of any one person, we fail Britain. Talent is 21st-century wealth. Every person liberated to fulfil their potential adds to our wealth (Tony Blair quoted in *The Times*, 29 September 1999).

British citizens, positioned in Blair's speech as equal citizens, are conceptualised as resources for the nation's competitive position in the global market. They are primarily seen as citizens with rights and responsibilities as waged workers, and a specific model of work is implied in this third way discourse.

The Industrial-Patriarchal Concept of Work

In this section, I draw on Mechthild Hart's conceptualisation of the industrial-patriarchal model of work (Hart, 1992) to reveal the ways that New Labour policy exacerbates the positions of vulnerability of marginalised groups in British society.



Hart seeks to demonstrate how the current social system, based on the drive to accumulate capital, reinforces, supports and helps to create the social divisions, hierarchies and mechanisms of power characteristic of an 'industrial-patriarchal' society. It is her assertion that we cannot attempt to discuss education without

taking notice of the current dramatic shifts and changes affecting the organisation and distribution of work, and the nature and actual content of work and work-related skills, knowledge and experiences (Hart, 1992:1).

Her claim is that a major thrust within industry today is to find the cheapest labour possible (see also Holland with Frank and Cooke, 1998; Aronowitz and Di Fazio, 1994; Reich, 1992). Generally, this has been made possible by globalisation and changing technology. Due to 'capital mobility', that is the ability of industry to ship raw materials to the 'third world' for assembly and then export it back, employers are now equipped with an effective mechanism to keep wages low.

the spatial division of labour has seriously undermined the bargaining power of the traditional industrial working class in industrialised countries i.e. has generally cheapened wage labour (Hart, 1992: 20).

Giddens also marks out the theme of globalisation as a key characteristic of contemporary society, but he claims that we do not need to understand globalisation as an issue about social justice (Giddens, 1998: 67). Further issues that he contends fall outside of emancipatory politics include scientific and technological change and our relationship to the natural world (*ibid.*). Hart's analysis underlines boldly the reasons that such claims made by Giddens on behalf of New Labour are dangerous for the most vulnerable groups within and without British society.

She borrows the concept of the 'housewifization of labour' (a term coined by a group of West German sociologists at the Bielefeld Centre for Sociology of Development; see Mies, 1986) to further her thesis (Hart, 1992: 20). The concept is useful to demonstrate the 'systematic utilisation of the sexual division of labour to cheapen both male and female labour' (*ibid.*: 20). Hart is interested in

work relations here rather than specific tasks and kinds of labour. The housewife is regarded as a structural category revealing the 'organising principle of the (capitalist) sexist division of labour' behind both male and female labour (*ibid.*: 21).

Hart compares 'normal' wage labour to 'marginal' wage labour, arguing that although the 'normal' wage labourer is taken as typical, more and more workers, both in the 'first' and 'third' world, work within the marginal model (see also Pearson, 2000). The characteristics of these can be seen as similar to those of the unwaged housewife; the conditions are often precarious, not protected by legal contract, without benefits, sickness pay or holidays, often in hazardous situations and very low paid. Some examples she provides of 'marginal' wage labour or the 'informal sector of work' are illegal labour, homework and temporary or seasonal work. The 'marginal' wage earner's conditions are further characterised by lack of benefits, no hope of promotion, tied to the means of production and are linked to forms of direct and indirect coercion (*ibid.*: 23). She poses 'marginal' labour as the counterpart of 'normal' labour, paralleling the counterparts of the housewife and the male breadwinner.

This analysis is crucial when considering the consequences of New Labour's policies to reform the Welfare State by emphasising risk rather than security. The already wide divisions between rich and poor, secure and insecure, will deepen, with the poorest groups being 'encouraged' by new policy to take risks. Single mothers are a case in point; as they leave the security of welfare to retrain briefly before returning to work, the majority will find themselves in the marginal sector of work as described by Hart. Such experiences of insecurity in the name of risk will have repercussions for the next generations that have grown up in a society that cares little for their needs and security.

The dominant discourses of security and risk shape the ways that different subjects position themselves in relation to family, work and education. Security, within this discourse, signifies a negative concept of (feminised and racialised) dependence while risk represents (masculinist and white-raced) independence. For example, Hilda, a middle-class Access to HE student, explains that her decision to shift her focus from education to work is directly related to the

break-up of her marriage, and her refusal to 'be on income support and be a single parent'.

I think when I first came to College I was very determined that I'd have a new career by the end of it, and I felt, after the first year, that I was capable of doing that, and so I went on to the Access course, hoping to go on to do a degree. But now, I'm umm, I've come to the point now that I don't think its going to lead me to that unfortunately because I'm now separated and I need to get back to work and I'll have to go back to what I was doing before. So from that point of view it's very disappointing. If I could afford it I would study full-time. Now that we're separated and I'm not getting any income from my husband, I feel I need to get some money coming in and get back into the real world. I could study, stay on income support and be a single parent, but I don't want to do that (Hilda, recorded conversation, 1999).

Interestingly, Hilda positions herself as a single parent only when claiming welfare benefits, while positioning herself as 'part of the real world' when in paid work.

Women's Work and the Market

In a market society where social value is directly measured in monetary equivalents, anything that is 'naturally' available and therefore can be appropriated free of cost is essentially worthless (Hart, 1992: 26).

Because mothering and housework are seen to be tied to female biology and therefore naturalised, the subordination of women and the exploitation of their labour is seen as legitimate (*ibid.*: 24). 'The housewife whose work is (ideally) entirely free of charge, must inevitably become the ideal form of labour, representing the highest degree of cheapness' (*ibid.*: 26). Hart identifies two important dimensions which bear on the industrial-patriarchal concept of work tied to 'housewifised labour':

1. It is socially devalued.
2. It is associated with idea that the cheap labourer somehow has access to resources outside the wage relation.

She claims that employers increasingly look to hire young women who are seen as 'docile', 'easily manipulable' and 'subservient'. Young men, she argues, are perceived as a threat to control, and more likely to respond to poor work conditions aggressively or to organise a strike. Furthermore, women are seen as having skills useful in marginal work, including attention to detail, flexibility, patience, care and ability to cope with boring and repetitive work, similar to the kinds of skills required in housework. So although it appears to be positive that more women than men are now being recruited into the labour force, the root reasons for this phenomenon are tied to traditional sexist stereotypes. Furthermore, as many women's male partners fall into unemployment, the situation becomes more desperate for women to accept work which is under the poorest of conditions and for the lowest of wages (*ibid.*: 37). Indeed, such conditions of Black women's experiences of work in Britain were powerfully documented over a decade ago (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 1985).

Hart's analysis provides insight in the arena of access education and lifelong learning, where policies are being developed to encourage those on welfare benefits to participate in 'education' as part of the wider job-seeking project. Qualities and skills associated with women are now sought after in the world of work and are being taught on most FE courses under the label 'Key Skills'. Men and women are expected by employers to have these skills on entry to the labour force. However, Hart reveals how these skills are exploited in a way that does not benefit large sections of the population. Therefore, what appears on the surface to be progress for women, actually is about the increased exploitation of the most vulnerable groups in British society.

Links between Work and the Lifelong Learning Movement

Much of the government policy documents and literature on lifelong learning and widening educational participation argues the need for a 'better skilled workforce', reinforcing the emphasis on individual efficacy. For example, David Blunkett, Education and Employment Secretary stated:

The DfEE has a major role in realising the Government's ambitions for a prosperous British economy. Better education and training will be the

bedrock of increased productivity, while better targeting of resources will give everyone the opportunity to reach their full potential. To meet the challenges, published last month in “Learning and Working Together for the Future” we have set objectives on raising standards of education; encouraging lifelong learning and helping people without jobs into work (Blunkett quoted in DfEE website, 1998).

The key aim for educators, in their partnership with business and industry, is to prepare 'educational consumers' for the world of work through the acquisition of Key and Basic skills. Literacy is subsumed under the heading Basic Skills, including reading, writing, numeracy and computing skills. Included under the umbrella of Key Skills are communication skills, interpersonal skills, problem solving, and the ability to be flexible and adaptable. Communication and interpersonal skills prepare potential workers for the expanded service industry, where they will be expected to project a 'positive image' on behalf of the organisation they are working for. Furthermore, workers must learn to 'cope' in stressful situations; of course one can see the immediate benefit of coping skills in an increasingly stressful world. The roots of these problems are constantly buried, however, while quick-fix strategies are put into place. Teaching students coping skills serves the employer most; serving as a mechanism of social control, containing the threat of resistance or organised protest, and manipulating workers into accepting the responsibility to cope in inhumane and exploitative situations. Such strategies will ultimately exacerbate the situations of vulnerability and powerlessness experienced by women, ethnic minority groups, disabled people, the poor and all other groups often characterised as intrinsically incapable of 'coping effectively'. Education in this context teaches potential workers the 'value' of repressing feelings of anger when they have been treated unjustly (Hart, 1992). The following extract from Vanessa's Personal Statement, a piece of coursework for Return to Study, highlights the way such strategies within access education lead students to believe anger, even in the context of human rights, represents 'weakness':

One of my weaknesses is to address people in a rather harsh manner when I feel strongly about something they have done or I believe in. I know I have to learn to control this abrupt manner and I am aware of it more than ever now. My reason for being this way is because I am a bit of a crusader. If I can fight for

rights that will help others then I will do so (Vanessa, Personal Statement, October 1997).

Rather than developing critical awareness around existing work structures, which perpetuate social inequalities and reside in a social framework of hierarchical power dynamics, educators are required to teach students to cope with 'stressful' situations seen as a natural part of everyday life. It is the individual who cannot cope, this logic asserts, who will 'fall by the wayside'. In other words, the 'flawed' individual, or the 'underdeveloped', 'irrational' and 'emotional' individual explains away the existence of social problems such as poverty, unemployment and homelessness.

The imperative created by the discourse of widening educational participation is to recruit those most disadvantaged into 'education' to improve their chances and provide opportunities for them to increase their skills (Dawe, 1999; Stuart, 1999). However, the rapid decline of well-paying jobs at all levels is not being addressed. Although the argument repeatedly is for education to 'produce' workers with 'higher skills' due to technological advances, the implications of the diminishing of jobs in all areas, due to the replacement of human labour with computerised technology, is not being discussed.

Also ignored is the problem that 'higher skill' does not necessarily translate into higher pay or higher status, as, due to globalisation and 'capital mobility', employers are motivated and well placed to find the cheapest labour possible (Hart, 1992). As corporations and businesses manufacture products wherever the labour is cheapest, employees are increasingly powerless to negotiate better pay and conditions, despite their 'higher skills'. Indeed, it is becoming apparent that a university degree no longer guarantees employment, particularly of a professional status and it does not guarantee a salary above poverty level. Such issues are raced and gendered as revealed by a study conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. Their research revealed that graduates from ethnic minority backgrounds are up to three times more likely to end up unemployed than their white counterparts (Major, 16 May 2000). Furthermore, their findings demonstrated that the body was crucial to career opportunities; for

example, tall men generally benefit from higher earnings while obese women are paid less on average than other employees (*ibid.*). Such findings have been unpublished due to worries that this would undermine central policy to widen educational participation:

Given the government's policy to widen access, it would be perverse to produce an indicator that would have the effect of discouraging institutions from recruiting such students (HEFC quoted in *ibid.*).

However, as access to education does widen, employers demand qualifications to prove the acquisition of 'higher skills'. With the decreasing of job openings, and the increasing of competition to gain lower and lower status jobs, employers are well positioned to strive towards employing cheap labour, while employees, at all levels, are in a position of greater vulnerability. Such a phenomenon has touched those moving into the professional arena, as well. For example, further education lecturers are experiencing the conditions described by Hart, as they are offered temporary and part-time positions, and are expected to demonstrate increased 'flexibility' in their work. They are expected to undertake a diversity of roles under the label of 'tutor', successfully recruit large numbers of students, take work home to complete whenever necessary, care for students inside and outside the classroom for retention purposes, be an administrator as well as a teacher, all while being paid for a shorter week (Sellers, 1998). Such work conditions support Hart's thesis of the 'housewifization of labour'. The juggling acts performed by housewives (seen as a natural capacity of women) are now expected of all paid marginal workers, and of mature students.

Mature students can juggle lots of things

On 9 March 1999, Tessa Blackstone, minister for education, led a national relaunch of Access to Higher Education. In her keynote address, she made clear her commitment to widening access and the government's acknowledgement of the success of Access to HE courses. However, rather than addressing the key issue of student funding, she applauded the success of mature students to juggle study while maintaining other commitments in their lives.

Following the Dearing Report (1997), the government decided to radically reform the student funding system by replacing grants with loans and charge students for university tuition fees. This has made a significant impact on the constitution of the undergraduate student population, and the number of full-time students recruited onto Access to Higher Education courses (Major, 1998). Mature students from poorer socio-economic backgrounds, precisely those groups the government refers to in the widening educational participation discourse, must calculate the risk of debt and negotiate complex funding systems before accessing education. Consequently, Access to Higher Education co-ordinators have sadly witnessed student numbers dropping year by year across Britain (Wicks, 2000; Sand et al, 1999). It is astonishing that there is an element of surprise, as the entry of mature, ethnic minority, women and working class students into higher education thins out dramatically after fundamental changes in student funding has occurred.

Tessa Blackstone implicitly responded to these circumstances in her speech, referring repeatedly to part-time study for adult students, who have proven their ability at juggling many things at once. Of course, many of these student 'jugglers' have been women, managing family and education, and quite often part-time work as well. The new expectation, it appears, is for these women to cope with education, family commitments and full-time employment as well. Any individual who cannot cope with the maintenance of multiple responsibilities at once, simply will not be provided access to higher education. Indeed, this has been another fundamental shift in the ideology of the Access movement: there appears to be a consensus between Access practitioners and policy makers that Access to Higher Education must recruit those students who can *prove* that they would benefit from degree level study (Randall, 1999). Only pedagogical approaches, which tend to shape Access in the mould of traditional 'A' level courses, a long way from the radical pedagogy characteristic of the Access movement, could attempt to measure this kind of rational ability believed to be required in order for an individual to benefit from higher education.

In line with such an ideological framework, Blackstone suggested that we must recognise the value of the Access certificate as an end in itself. I am convinced

that both Access students and Access tutors have long appreciated the value of attaining the Access certificate, however not without the expectation that the student would be able to progress to degree level study. After all Access to Higher Education is access *to higher education*; a preparatory course for degree level study. Blackstone's suggestion that students and tutors should now feel content with the Access certificate alone, followed by a return to work, or a sideways move into other FE courses, is less than satisfactory.

Furthermore, research into funding mechanisms has demonstrated that part-time students are not well supported. The FEFC methodology does not encourage or adequately recognise part-time learning and part-time undergraduates are expected to support their studies through employment (Derrick, 1997).

The following excerpts from empirical material demonstrate the problem with Government willingness to encourage mature students to increase their proven success at performing juggling acts, holding up the worlds of home, work and education simultaneously:

Sometimes I feel tired in this class, because by the middle of the week, combining home, children, working and studying - it is very difficult to juggle everything (Dorothy, student diary, 14.4.99).

I was so enthusiastic and so keen to do well and I worked so hard that um I ended up getting burn-out and I collapsed. And uh, I was just sort of completely exhausted, 'cause I was working at night to do, to pay for the course as well. Because I was doing the course part-time, I didn't get a grant or anything, so I was looking after the children during the day, working in a casualty emergency department of the hospital at night and then at university two or three days a week. So I was total burn-out, I was very very poorly. (Charity, recorded conversation, 1999)

The emphasis of policy on mature students' ability to cope implicitly justifies the removal of key support systems such as grants that have direct implications for widening access. There is a clear contradiction between new student funding

arrangements, which require students to risk undertaking substantial levels of debt and the concern of the state to widen educational access.

Access/ing education or Economic Regeneration?

The government has utilised widening educational participation as a device to address the concerns of the State about national economic stability in relation to globalisation.

It is with the challenge of globalisation that the education policy now starts (Blunkett, 2000)

Economic stability, according to neo-liberal discourse, is jeopardised by the 'culture of dependency' created by the Welfare State, the 'literacy crisis' and the individual failure of students, parents and teachers. The guiding vision for the future is a free market, enhancing competition between schools, colleges and individuals and releasing the hold of state control.

Contradictorily, regulatory bodies, such as the FEFC, QAA and Learning Skills Council, ensure that the State holds a firm hand over what shape education and lifelong learning will take. The introduction of the New Deal has linked welfare benefits, education and training firmly to a regulatory system of ensuring nobody gets a 'free ride' (Ingham, 1999). The government has clearly expressed that this includes single parents (mothers) and the disabled (Sherman, 1999). As the Secretary of State firmly asserted, 'if we are to invest heavily in FE we must do it on the basis of something for something' (Blunkett quoted in Ingham, 1999).

Neo-Conservative discourses penetrate New Labour ideology. By regulating the financial circumstances of single mothers for example, the government has implicitly attacked the feminist movement, placing women firmly back into their position as wives and mothers first, and paid workers second. Any women who do not conform to this model of motherhood, must support their 'choice' by engaging in 'work' (childcare within this ideology is not recognised as work

unless undertaken by a paid nanny or childminder). Such a position upholds the sanctity of the traditional nuclear family, and positions single mothers on benefits as deviant. Education has been called upon to play a key role within this movement, approach and philosophy, by utilising the widening participation discourse to call single 'parents' and all other 'long-term unemployed' into 'education', preparing them for employment, and imposing social regulatory courses which are often disguised as Key Skills. Such courses might include elements such as 'good' parenting, team working, anger management and time management.

The discourse of widening educational participation needs to be deconstructed collectively with students in order to mobilise counter-hegemonic discourses in the interests of access students. The dominant discourse places access students in precarious and vulnerable situations in relation to globalisation, technological change and the imperative of forming a society of 'risk-takers'. It prioritises the national economy and individualised wealth and 'success', of necessity rooted in social inequality, as the guiding purpose for widening participation. It therefore enshrines particular ways of understanding the world; a Western, male-centred, middle-class and white cultural perspective is re/privileged through the hegemonic discourse of widening educational participation.

The policy of widening participation will thus help to reproduce material and cultural inequalities. Greg's comments on page 48 demonstrate that the discursive production of subjectivity ('I am useless') is intertwined with lack of material and economic resources. Nancy Fraser (1997) emphasises the importance of addressing both structural and discursive aspects of social injustice. She distinguishes two distinct strands of social injustice, for the purpose of developing strategies to confront it. However, she points out that the distinction made is only analytical, because 'in practice, the two are intertwined'. The first strand, located within the political-economic structure of society, she names 'socioeconomic injustice', which includes exploitation, poverty and deprivation and requires the redistribution of wealth (Fraser, 1997:13). The second is cultural and 'is rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication' and requires the recognition of difference

(ibid:14). She argues that it is imperative that both recognition and redistribution are addressed in order to combat social injustice:

Despite the differences between them, both socioeconomic injustice and cultural injustice are pervasive in contemporary societies. Both are rooted in processes and practices that systematically disadvantage some groups of people vis-à-vis others. Both consequently, should be remedied (Fraser, 1997:14-15).

To illustrate her argument, she conceptualises a spectrum of different kinds of social collectivities, with one 'ideal-type' of social collectivity fitting the redistribution end of injustice, for example, social class, and another 'ideal-type' fitting the recognition end of injustice, for example, a 'conception of a despised sexuality' (*ibid.*)⁸. Some social collectivities, such as women, she argues, are 'bivalent'; that is, they require *both* a politics of redistribution and a politics of recognition.

For example, the current political-economic structure reproduces 'gender-specific modes of exploitation, marginalization and deprivation' (Fraser, 1997:19-20):

Eliminating gender-specific exploitation, marginalization, and deprivation requires abolishing the gender division of labour - both the gendered division between paid and unpaid labour and the gender division within paid labour. The logic of the remedy is akin to the logic with respect to class: it is to put gender out of business as such. If gender were nothing but a political-economic differentiation, in sum, justice would require its abolition. (Fraser, 1997:20)

However, gender is also a 'cultural-valuational difference' (*ibid.*). A 'major feature of gender injustice is androcentrism: the authoritative construction of norms that privilege traits associated with masculinity' (*ibid.*). Therefore, this 'bivalent' feature of gender injustice creates a dilemma in that as women suffer two forms of social injustice, they also require two forms of remedy. Fraser concludes that both socialist feminist and feminist deconstruction are required to develop strategies to counter the two forms of social injustice.

Access education needs to be collaboratively refashioned, to address social in/justice in light of Fraser's insights. Access students simultaneously require a strategy of redistribution of funds (as suggested by Kennedy, 1997) and the recognition of their specific, although heterogeneous, needs and experiences. Such a project needs to be addressed at the local level, within different access classrooms and collectively between practitioners, students and academics. This research represents such a project, hence collaboration with students is a central aim.

In the next chapter, I trace my journey as a feminist ethnographer of access education and as a co-participant of the research process. The chapter considers the value of collaborative approaches that open up spaces for deconstruction of dominant meanings, self-reflexivity and the reconstruction of theory that places experience of participants at the centre of knowledge production within the field of access education.

Notes for Chapter Two

¹ A student may complete and gain credit for between one to five units.

² The National Open College Network describes Level One as the acquisition of a foundation of competencies, knowledge and understanding in a limited range of predictable and structured contexts that prepare the learner to progress to further achievements. The NOCN approximates the equivalence of Level One to GCSE D-G, GNVQ Foundation or NVQ 1.

³ Level Two is described as the acquisition of a broader range of competencies, knowledge and understanding which demonstrate the extension of previous abilities in less predictable and structured contexts and prepare the learner to progress to further achievements. The NOCN approximates the equivalence of Level Two to GCSE A*- C, GNVQ Intermediate or NVQ 2 (NOCN, 2000).

⁴ Level Three is described by NOCN as 'the acquisition of a more complex range of competencies, knowledge and understanding in contexts which develop autonomous, analytical and critical abilities that prepare the learner to progress to further independent achievements' (NOCN, 2000).

⁵ I taught the qualitative research methods element for one term during the academic year 1998/1999. The students on this course became 'co-participants' of this research and were involved in developing collaborative approaches to methodology and pedagogy with me.

⁶ I sought permission from course tutors and students before collecting and using this data for my research.

⁷ I use the term 'unpaid worker' to refer to individuals whose labour is not waged, such as mothers, housewives and informal carers.

⁸ Of course, in practice, there is no such 'ideal-type', because social collectivities intersect and overlap. Fraser presents these categories for purposes of analysis towards strategies for social justice.

Chapter Three: Towards Collaboration: Methods and Methodology

...the role of an educational researcher is always to work in specific circumstances *with* rather than *on* or even *for* the people who inhabit them...Such a way of working is also a way of dealing with some of the arrogance presupposed in some forms of knowledge, and their implication in structures of dominance and oppression (Griffiths, 1998: 111).

Introduction

This chapter aims to describe in detail the research design of this small-scale ethnographic study of access education. I map out the stages of the research process, and the ways that they were always overlapping and largely driven by my commitment to practise 'collaborative' research approaches. In the research I positioned myself as a co-participant of the project, creating complex power relations that required continual reflexivity and close attention. I also moved between two positions, that of teacher and of researcher. I explore the methodological and ethical dilemmas relating to both the attempt to develop collaborative approaches and to this dual position I occupied.

The Auto/biographical in Collaborative Research

In this chapter I trace my journey as a feminist research student completing a PhD. This is not intended to conceal the messy process that research is by making it appear to be clean, neat and tidy. Rather, my aim is to clarify my steps through the research process while reminding myself and the reader that all stages of the research were overlapping, complicated and impossible to fully control. As argued in Chapter One, the process was both complicated and enriched by my dual location as teacher and researcher, and as a woman juggling paid and unpaid work. Other aspects of my life, as a mother and wife for example, shaped the research process in significant ways that deserves attention in examining the production of this ethnography. A key theme throughout this chapter is 'auto/biography', highlighting its prominence in this thesis as a concept, a method of data collection and a methodological issue.

Auto/biography
Concept: auto/biography is socially constructed - interconnects with the stories of others
Method of Data Collection: collecting participants' life and educational stories
Methodological Issue: Exploration of the social dynamics involved in constructing an auto/biography for research purposes

Figure 3.A

The second key theme of the chapter is collaborative research. My aim to develop collaborative research approaches was inspired by feminist methodology concerned with 'empowering' and non-exploitative research (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998; Maynard and Purvis, 1994) and with poststructuralist critiques of positivism (Usher, 1997; Lather, 1991). I was particularly inspired by Lather's description of a 'postpositivist era' characterised by:

an increased visibility for research designs that are interactive, contextualized, and humanly compelling because they invite joint participation in exploration of research issues (Lather, 1991: 52).

Central to my project was the concern for joint participation, and it felt to me that researching my own students provided spaces for such interaction. I wanted to articulate the important interconnections between the private (e.g. their experiences of family and mothering, the emotional and subjective) and the public (e.g. their experiences of access education) as lived out by the women and men participating in the research. Such interconnections have crucial ramifications for understanding, reproducing, deconstructing and reshaping meanings around adult educational participation. I was interested in promoting their interactive contributions to reshaping educational discourses through a research project they felt some collective ownership of. I also felt it was crucial to write myself into the research as a co-participant and to examine my relationship with students/participants and the effects of this on the production of data and the final textual version of the research project. In other words, *reflexivity* was a key methodological imperative of the research. Reflexivity involves acknowledging the 'world-making', constructive quality of research' (Usher, 1997: 36).

It is in a sense to *research* the research, to bend the research back on itself, to ask 'by what practices, strategies and devices is world-making achieved? By asking this question, the research act is made self-referential or *reflexive* (*ibid.* original emphasis).

Reflexivity in teaching and research requires that we examine how our values insert themselves in our work in the classroom and in the field (Lather, 1991:80). Reflexive researchers reject the universalised claims to knowledge held by mainstream theorists, challenging theory that forbids and rejects knowledge emerging from the personal realm of human life (Ellsworth, 1992). Co-participants examine the research process, including a focus on the researcher and her auto/biographical relationship to the research. Feminist poststructuralists (Flax, 1995; Kenway, 1995; Luke & Gore, 1992) have argued that knowledge construction and meaning making is a process that is never conclusive and is always changing and fluid. Knowledge is eternally incomplete, because we are unable to fully access the unconscious, and to separate ourselves from our subjective views of the world (Ellsworth, 1997). Values, culture, and social positioning are not dynamics which can be 'removed' or isolated when convenient; rather the researcher, teacher and learners are always entrenched in the historical, geographical, political, personal, economic, psychological and social dynamics of the moment, shaping their interpretations, perceptions and ways of knowing. These dynamics cannot be fully known, as they are never fully visible or audible to us. 'Hearing' and 'representing' are key concepts for the researcher to think about, including how participants are 'heard', how this is transformed into a textual form of transcript, how bits of the transcript are then selected, included or discarded, and finally how participants' stories are re/presented in the final text. To exclude such examinations while claiming objectivity is to be dishonest and to deny the existence of unequal power relations within the research process, while ignoring the central role of the researcher in shaping the process and producing the final text. A teacher/researcher who practises reflexivity in the classroom, in the field and during analysis of data, will address these issues and the dilemmas that they raise for co-participants.

The auto/biographical, collaborative and reflexive approaches I developed and practised I hoped would contribute to the collaborative deconstruction of dominant discourses and the mobilisation of empowering and oppositional discourses (see Chapters Six and Seven).

(Re)Constructing a Feminist Post/structuralist Ethnography

Ethnography, its roots in colonialism and anthropology, was transformed by sociologists associated with the 'Chicago School', who 'brought to ethnography a campaigning, critical edge, and a great sympathy for the underclass who were the principle subject of their studies' (Fielding, 1993:156). My work is partially located within the fields of educational, sociological and cultural feminist ethnography (Hey, 1997; Skeggs, 1995, 1997; Willis, 1977). Such ethnography usually includes features such as: participant observation, the use of mixed methods, reflexivity, the examination of the ethnographer's relationship to the research and to the participants, a conversational and open approach to interviewing, contextualising the research and conducting it over a prolonged period within the settings of the participants (Coffey, 1999; Davies, 1999; Hey, 1997; Carspecken, 1996; Skeggs, 1994, 1995; Delamont, 1992; Denzin, 1970). This research represents an ethnography in the sense that it engages in the lives of those being studied and it attempts to 'fully acknowledge and utilise subjective experience as an intrinsic part of the research' (Davies, 1999:4-5).

Ethnography provided a powerful space for creating collaboration between co-participants. My deep and intense involvement in the world of access education, as a student, teacher, researcher and external examiner, enabled me to participate in the research at a variety of levels. I used such multi-level involvement as a resource for collaboration. Knowledge that I too was a mature access student enhanced the relationship of trust I shared with students, encouraging interaction that included me as a co-participant of the research. Students identified with me as a mature student with children, experiencing many of the same daily frustrations and obstacles that they encountered. Like me, they understood motherhood as connected to every other aspect of their lives, as hugely influential in the ways they made sense of the world and as a valuable

experience in the reconstruction of theory. I also identified with them, recognising myself in them. This interpersonal dynamic, of 'sameness' (Hey, 2000: 176) while occupying very different positions of power in terms of the teacher/student relationship, carried potency for the production of this ethnography, particularly in relation to the development of collaboration between students and myself.

I position the experiences of co-participants as crucial to understanding the discourses of access education, lifelong learning and widening educational participation and how these affect the lives of students negotiating access provision (Parr, 2000; Merrill, 1999). Although this is a small study, which cannot make overarching claims, I believe that participants' representations of their experiences of access education has something important to say about access education more generally. This led to the formulation of key questions about researching access students through auto/biography: What do the auto/biographies of access students reveal about dominant discourses of widening educational participation? What impact does educational participation have on the lives, relationships and subjectivity/ies of access students? How is subjectivity re/produced through the discursive field of access education?

Feminist post/structural critiques and re/formulations of 'experience' have illuminated the theoretical limitations and simplifications entangled in unproblematic notions of experience.

While language in the form of different competing discourses does indeed give meaning to events retrospectively, this meaning is not the reflection of an already fixed reality but a version of meaning' (Weedon, 1993: 78).

The point is that this 'version of meaning' does not lose its significance, but represents an important resource for deconstructing the meanings and language that shape how we make sense of our experiences within the specific social contexts in which we are situated. By understanding the narration of an experience as a version rather than the uncovering of a fixed reality, we can imagine and create change. For example, when an access student comes to the classroom with an understanding that her secondary school experience is

evidence of an intrinsic lack of academic ability, a deconstruction of her experience may lead to a new version that repositions her as a knowing subject.

Although I work with a concept of experience as problematic, acknowledging that it is constituted by discourse, diverse, multiple, contradictory, complex and socially constructed, I do not abandon 'experience' as a valuable resource:

The feminist case that where social relations of gender are subordinating, then they should be transformed, rests on accounts of the experiences of the subordinated/subordinating, as well as the theory of subordination. The judgement of what should be changed is clearly political and ethical. To identify what should be transformed, we need appropriate theory: to produce appropriate theory we need knowledge of what is to be transformed, and so some sense of how subordination is experienced. Experiences, conceptualisations of experience and judgements of what should change are interconnected and varied, so feminists are never going to agree on everything they know, whose voices to listen to, and how our varying stories should be judged. But in connecting theory, experience and judgement, the knowing feminist should be accountable for the sense she makes of her own and other people's accounts, and how her judgements are made (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 1999: 383).

I also see relationships within the research as a crucial focus point for producing ethnography. The research process involves the forming, developing and maintaining of close relationships built on trust and reciprocity. This unavoidably and rightfully involves the emotional:

The contrived context of initial, and sometimes long-term, relations must be set alongside the reality of feelings, emotions, lasting friendship and occasionally painful memories that they can bring. Both parties in field relationships can find these 'work' relations meaningful, reciprocal and based on shared commitment. Feelings of trust and of betrayal are equally revealing of a relationship which had real emotional and personal consequence. Many field researchers have written autobiographical accounts of the friendship, commitment and love that they found in the field; and where that has diminished, of feelings of hurt, betrayal and guilt (Coffey, 1999: 55).

This under-theorised but incredibly rich and salient aspect of doing feminist ethnography, needs to be explored and written into the ethnographic text. The relationship that I formed with students/participants was hugely rewarding, supportive and validating. The process of researching my own students created

an intensity that most likely would not have been present at such a degree while researching another institution and group of students. It meant often that my role as a teacher had no professional 'cut-off' points; I made myself constantly available to students, causing tensions between my personal life as a wife and mother and my professional life as a teacher and researcher. Students telephoned me in the late evenings and early mornings, came over for coffee and had long chats with me in the school playground or at the supermarket. This often was a source of irritation for my family, who continually had to cope with the intense level of my work and my work relationships. The ethnographic nature of the research combined with the supportive relationship between access tutor and student reinforced, complicated and confused the interconnections between the private, personal and public¹ realms of my life and the multiplicity of my subjectivity. The relationships developed through recognitions, sameness, difference and dis/continuities were crucial to the production of knowledge through this ethnography.

Research Participants

The 23 participants in this research project were access students at 'Ford' College whom I taught over a period of between one to three academic years (1996-1999). 12 students were participating in the Return to Study/Learning Pathway programme, 3 in the Access to Higher Education programme and 7 moved from Return to Study to Access. I taught Return to Study, Women's Studies, Qualitative Research Methods and GCSE Sociology. Therefore, all students/participants were involved at some point with other courses taught by other access tutors, and so their auto/biographies do not only represent their experiences of being taught by me. This complexity of relationships and experiences provided rich data, but also generated ethical dilemmas.

In terms of accessing participants for this project, I had the convenience of a 'ready-made' cohort of access students. At the time of collecting a group of research participants, I had access to a large body of students as 'Return to Study Programme Manager', because I was the first port of call for new students enquiring about the programme. Furthermore, I had access to the database of all

Return to Study students and regularly sent a letter out to the student body. I also had records of students who had been registered on Return to Study in the past. This gave me access to about 200 students. However, I had to make decisions about the group of participants and I did so on the following basis:

- I wanted students from both the Return to Study *and* the Access to Higher Education programmes, to represent this mix of access education experience.
- I wanted to develop collaborative approaches in methodology and pedagogy and this seemed most possible within the teacher/researcher and student/participant paradigm.
- I wanted to keep a research diary of interactions between co-participants in the access classroom - including myself as a co-participant. This facilitated the production of ethnography with particular characteristics; collaboration, reflexivity and participant observation.
- I was committed to the development of reflexive research approaches, requiring that I research myself as an access teacher and researcher. It was important also to encourage reflexive practices in the access classroom between co-participants.
- I wanted to create a research environment conducive to the production of rich, intimate and personal data - the auto/biographical - and this was far more likely to occur between a researcher and participant who had an established relationship based on trust.
- I wanted a small group of research participants because of the emphasis of the study on depth and intensity.

In the first year of my PhD (1997/1998), as a part-time student, I kept a research diary, recording interactions in the classroom. However, I did not explicitly approach students at this point to formally request their participation in the research. I did discuss the research with them informally, explaining that I was keeping a research diary, and that I might want to interview them next year.

Summary of Research Participants

	Women	Men	Total
Working class*	16	3	19
Middle class*	4	0	4
Married with children	14	1	15
Married without children	2	0	2
Single Mother	1	0	1
Single	3	2	5
Heterosexual	20	3	23
White	20	3	23
Employed Full-time	1	2	3
Employed Part-time	8	1	9
Total participants	20	3	23

Figure 3.B: *participants self-defined their social class position

The following academic year (1998/1999), I resigned from my post as Return to Study Programme Manager to pursue my doctoral research full-time. I continued to teach two classes a week at the College, Return to Study and Women's Studies, and picked up an extra class, Qualitative Research Methods, during the second term. I also continued to keep a research diary of my experiences and observations in the College. In October 1998, I sent formal letters to all my current students (26) inviting them to participate in the study (see appendix A). I also asked five other students from the previous year to participate, because they were attending access courses that I did not teach (the Learning Pathway and Access to HE). In January 1999, I sent letters to my new Qualitative Research Methods students asking them to participate (8 students). I ended up with a group of 23 students who agreed to participate in the study.

Asking my own students to participate in my research project carried serious ethical issues. Students felt a loyalty towards me as their tutor, making refusal to participate in my project rather difficult whether or not this is what they desired. However, they generally appeared to feel honoured to have their experiences listened to and represented in research, because it helped them to recognise just

how valuable and important those experiences are. For access students, low self-esteem and low confidence are common issues after years of being positioned as 'non-academic' or 'low-achievers'. Women students, in particular, are often positioned as 'low-level achievers' according to dominant discourses about 'success' that validate specific kinds of achievement. Achievements located in the world of academia, politics, industry and business are publicly recognised, while achievement located in the domestic sphere of social life, raising a family for example, is represented as a natural phenomenon and disassociated from success and acquired skill (Hanmer, 1997; Jackson, 1997; Nicolson, 1997). To be involved in a research project that focused on their lives therefore carried a message to participants that their lives and experiences were not only important to me, as their tutor, but to research on education more generally. Beverly Skeggs, who also researched her students, describes similar responses from her participants:

Many of the young women confirmed Ann Oakley's observations that they could not believe they were interesting enough to be any use to a study. The students' sense of self-worth was enhanced by being given an opportunity to be valued, knowledgeable and interesting. In the follow-up studies this continues to be important. This challenges the idea that the researched are just objects of a voyeuristic bourgeois gaze (Skeggs, 1994: 81).

Feeling Vulnerable: Issues of power/lessness

A methodological aim in my research was to conduct non-exploitative research that validated participants' experiences and knowledge(s), and generated rich and in-depth data. This aim has generally led many feminists to favour qualitative methods (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998; Stanley, 1992; Oakley, 1990), perceiving it as more likely to produce research that 'empowers' women. However, other feminists have challenged this common sense link made between feminist methodology and qualitative methods, pointing out the value of *quantitative* methods, for example in promoting change in policy (Oakley, 2000; Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994: 34-36; Appleby, 1994: 2). Moreover, the level of intimacy generated through qualitative research methods has been noted as both empowering *and* exploitative (Skeggs, 1995; Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994).

There are complex issues of power to be explored here in my own qualitative research. Although there may have been a level of trust and support between myself, as the teacher/researcher, and the student/participant, the disclosure of traumatic life experiences had the potential to leave either party feeling exposed and vulnerable.

[P]ower, vulnerability and disclosure are not always as deterministically one way as is suggested in research literature' (Appleby, 1994: 5).

It was my intention to practise my feminist politics in both my positions as teacher and as researcher by maintaining a reciprocal relationship with students/participants through sharing personal stories with them. However, this did not simply 'balance out' the power relations. There were moments that I felt vulnerable as I stepped outside of the boundaries set through dominant discourses of professionalism. I was committed to working in ways that challenged the rules of convention, yet I often felt vulnerable about my job at the College *and* my success as a doctoral student because of the unconventional and oppositional approaches I practised.

Similarly, students often expressed their own anxieties and feelings of vulnerability about disclosing intimate thoughts and traumatic experiences to me. For them, it was not only risky to expose their personal lives and experiences, but also to reveal their frustrations and dissatisfactions about their access courses and tutors (including me). After all, their tutors had the power to ultimately determine their success or failure as access students. Therefore I had to be very careful and sensitive about how I used or discarded certain pieces of information collected through the research.

Moreover, the dual relationship I shared with other access staff, as a colleague *and* as a researcher, raised further ethical dilemmas. Although colleagues agreed when I requested their permission to conduct the research within our department, I sensed that as time went on they began to feel increasingly threatened by my research activities (this is my understanding and was never explicitly articulated by my colleagues). After I left the College, I heard that one of my former

colleagues worried I would interview her students after a class when she was having an "off-day" and she would thus be represented in a negative light in the research. It certainly was not my intention to undermine the work of my peers, and again I had to be very sensitive about using or discarding interesting data, considering students' and colleagues' (feelings of) security.

Ultimately, however, data that contributed in significant ways to my project and that supported the accounts of participants were included. The best I could do to resolve this dilemma, between the interests of individual subjects and the aims of the project, was to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of the study by changing names of people, places and courses. These contradictions between feminist politics, goals of empowerment (it is impossible to empower all subjects simultaneously as they occupy different positions of power and interest), collaboration, inclusion of data that helps to fulfil the aims of the study and excluding 'sensitive' data, are impossible to fully resolve. These competing concerns raise serious dilemmas for the researcher. Being reflexive about these contradictions and dilemmas and the ways that data is re-presented in the final version of the thesis is paramount. This requires the author of the thesis to explain precisely to the reader where different accounts are located in the research and how they come to be constructed, selected and included in the final text.

Although I encountered these complex sets of contradictions as the teacher/researcher, this dual location opened up exciting possibilities for innovative research approaches. Researching my own students enabled me to develop collaborative methods, which positioned me as a co-participant of the research. This research approach would not have been available had I decided to research access students outside of 'Ford' College whom I had not taught.

Developing Collaborative Research Approaches

The research design was driven largely by my methodological and pedagogical concern to contribute to the development of collaborative approaches to research

and teaching in access education. This led me to invite my own students as 'co-participants' of the research project, enabling me to:

1. examine the multiple levels of experiences of access education through participant observation, for example experiences of teaching *and* learning, while identifying the interconnections between experience, power relations and positionality;
2. deconstruct and reconstruct the discourses of widening educational participation in the classroom at 'Ford' College in collaboration with students/participants;
3. develop methods and methodology, as well as pedagogy, collaboratively with students/participants
4. practise collaborative approaches to analysis (although, as I will explain, this aspect of the research was particularly limited).

A principle guiding my work was that theory must be grounded in practice, underpinned by the idea of feminist praxis. This meant that I brought theory into the classroom, experimenting for example with critical pedagogical approaches (see Chapter Four). Such an approach was underpinned by the idea that writing a thesis based on what I read and what people said in interviews was greatly limited in developing strategies within access education for social justice. Rather, co-participants needed to live out the theories within the particular context of the classroom, and we needed to think through this lived experience together. This demanded that co-participants exercise reflexivity throughout the research, addressing power relations, ethical issues, the ways that knowledge is (re) produced through research and the possibility of reconstructing theory through collaborative social inquiry.

Patti Lather (1991) inspired my commitment to collaboration through praxis. Lather points out the value of 'reciprocity' in research, making a distinction between 'intent' and 'degree'. Her idea of reciprocity is very similar to my notion of collaboration. She explains:

Reciprocity implies give and take, a mutual negotiation of meaning and power. It operates at two points in emancipatory empirical research: the junctures between researcher and researched and data and theory (Lather, 1991:57).

Her argument is that although some mainstream social scientists have acknowledged the value of reciprocity, their intent is largely shaped by the desire for better data (Lather, 1991: 57). She proposes that:

we must go beyond the concern for more and better data to a concern for research as praxis. What I suggest is that we consciously use our research to help participants understand and change their situations (*ibid.*).

Reciprocity in research contains specific features, according to Lather. Interviews are interactive, dialogic and require self-disclosure on the part of the researcher. Sequential interviews of both individuals and small groups facilitate collaboration and a critical engagement with research issues. Research involves the negotiation of meaning, which entails 'recycling description, emerging analysis and conclusions to at least a subsample of respondents'. Through research, there 'is a dialectic between people's self-understandings and efforts to create an enabling context to question taken-for-granted beliefs and the authority culture has over us' (Lather, 1991:60-61). Lather further claims:

There, in the nexus of that dialectic, lies the opportunity to create reciprocal, dialogic research designs which both lead to self-reflection and provide a forum in which to test the usefulness, the resonance, of conceptual and theoretical formulations (Lather, 1991: 61).

In my own research, occupying the dual location of teacher and researcher facilitated collaboration at all stages of the research process; considering literature and theory, re/shaping research aims and questions, creating and re/developing the research design and data analysis. I wanted to involve participants in the development of the research design as much as possible.

However, this raised specific methodological dilemmas that demanded reflexivity in terms of research relationships and power, particularly as I occupied the dual position of teacher/researcher. My undergraduate research

training rooted in positivism became deeply challenged and forced me to confront the disjuncture between positivism and collaborative research. For example, early in my research project, during a Sociology lesson I was teaching, when we were focusing on ethical concerns in sociological research, I drew on my own research experiences. Students, who were also my participants, began to ask me probing questions, and I felt awkward at this point discussing my research dilemmas in detail with participants, mostly because of a concern that I would be overly influencing their attitudes, ideas and understandings about my research. I still thought I should remain silent and distanced, so that I would not 'lead' participants. Nevertheless, I did end up speaking about my research to them in some detail. Here is an excerpt from my research diary from that moment, in which themes of the blurring of boundaries, power relations and ethics powerfully emerge:

Yesterday in the Adult GCSE Sociology class, we discussed students' projects and sociological research methods. We looked in particular at ethical issues. This was very interesting, as suddenly, my teaching and research really collided! Using my own research as an example, I spoke about the ethical problems of doing research, which involved my students. We spoke about the blurs between overt and covert participant observation and I explained to them the confusions I experienced as their teacher/researcher/mutual mature student and friend. We spoke about trust, betrayal, confidentiality, participant awareness, power dynamics and applied these to my research. It felt strange speaking about these issues with the very class that I would be considering deeply in my PhD research. One student said that if I had asked if I could use the class as a focal point for my research when she first returned to education, she probably would never have come back for a second lesson. Another student insightfully pointed out that if I see my students in so many different ways (as students/participants/friends), do I wonder how they see me? By the end of the session I felt the discussion had been very useful for their thinking about their GCSE Sociology projects and my thinking about my research. Although I had told students about my research before, I hadn't gone into any great detail about it, and I realised this is precisely what I needed to do, and on a regular basis. If I am to keep this research diary in any reflexive and rigorous way, I must

continually re/consider the blurs between being a teacher and being a researcher and the ethical questions this raises. I realise now that if I am to approach this research ethically and in a non-exploitative way, and to maintain the trust of my students, I need to discuss my research with them throughout the whole research process (Research diary, 9 January, 1998).

Later, as a full time research student, I had much more time to develop my thinking about what a feminist methodology meant to me, and the ways that I might approach my research aim of developing collaborative approaches. The opportunity posed itself to put my ideas into practice one very inspiring lesson, teaching a group of Access to HE students 'Qualitative Research Methods' for the first time. During this first session, I began to discuss my research with students, and they quickly engaged in the discussion, making very insightful contributions. We had a lively discussion about positivism, the production of knowledge and the ways that research contributes to and might challenge the maintenance of unequal social relations. Although I had introduced them to the course with a course outline, together we decided to drop the agenda, and explore aspects of qualitative research through discussing our own emerging questions and ideas and by considering my PhD research project as a group.

This methodological experiment significantly contributed to the development of my research, and to the development of students' and my own understanding of the research process. It also helped us to examine key themes emerging in my research from their accounts and from the theory that framed my/our thinking, which enabled us to identify key links between methodological, epistemological and pedagogical issues. For example, I explained to them my desire to put critical pedagogical theory into practice, which resonated with their frustration around the conventional 'banking-type' approaches to teaching and learning (Freire, 1972; see Chapter Four) generally used on the Access course at Ford College. Together we looked at ways that research on access education could contribute to transformations in pedagogical approaches that allowed for their contributions to on-going discussions about what access education means to different people occupying different subject positions; e.g. tutor, student, college senior manager, central policy maker, and so forth. We explored how my PhD

research might contribute to pedagogical developments leading to student contributions to the reconstruction of ideas and knowledge. This meant that through methodological collaboration, I was able to explore and develop key research questions guiding the study (see Chapter One).

Over ten one-hour sessions, we discussed methodological, theoretical, pedagogical and epistemological issues, drawing on students' own experiences of access education and attempting to develop these conceptually and practically to apply to my research. Again there was a clear link between collaborative methodological approaches facilitating a group exploration of my key research questions. For example, as co-participants we examined these key questions: Can access education address the discursive level of educational mis/recognition *as well as* the structural level of educational in/equality? Can it challenge dominant discourses of widening educational participation that reinforce such social injustices? Through a theory of identity as fluid, how might educational spaces be opened up to subjects that challenge identities constituted through dominant discourses and mobilise oppositional discourses and subject positions?²

In response to these research questions, much of our classroom discussion focused on questions of power relations, as well as epistemological questions such as whose knowledge is privileged in educational research and within access classrooms. We then considered how these also applied to research contexts both generally and more specifically (in terms of my own research project). Together we looked at these questions in epistemological terms in relation to the production of knowledge through research and through access education. How could we, in our classroom and in my thesis, disrupt certain kinds of knowledges being privileged, while others were discounted and silenced? How could we simultaneously retain a politics of difference, where diverse and conflicting voices were validated? As a class and as co-participants, we wanted to respect and understand difference while maintaining a commitment to anticlassist, antiracist and anti(hetero)sexist practices.

Students, some whom had only just returned to education and had no formal qualifications, contributed to these very complex ideas, and really pushed my own thinking in my research project. I feel extremely grateful for this highly educative experience, and they repeatedly commented that their thinking had never been stretched in this way before. For me it represented a very special and exciting term.

However, it also raised some problematic issues that are highly significant methodologically. Although the class appeared to be collaborative and negotiable, this was an agenda that I was pushing. It is difficult to assess precisely whether or not each participant experienced the course/research as collaborative, and I am certain that such experience was varied and shifting in relation to positionality, power dynamics, confidence-level and access to the appropriate academic and analytical tools. Therefore, in many ways my approaches, although attempting to be all-inclusive, re/produced power relations that operated to reinforce exclusions. Yet I believe there were crucial *moments* when all participants did feel empowered and recognised the valuable contribution made by the group and by each individual member of the group. Collaborative approaches enabled temporary moments of destabilising unequal power relations between students/teacher and participants/researcher.

The opportunity to experiment with/in this course related to some complex issues that deserve attention here. Firstly, I was assigned, on short notice, to teach the course for one term only to cover 'qualitative research methods' with Access to HE students. I was selected precisely because I was actively involved in conducting qualitative research and was the only team member doing so at the time. I was provided with no criteria for the course at all, giving me a freedom not usually enjoyed in further education. Significantly, I did not enter the course with any strategy for experimental collaboration. It was the group of students combined with my current thinking that led us to create this experimental course together. This is illustrated by a diary entry:

Helen said she felt that this class should be compulsory for all Access students to raise their awareness. Later I realised I should have mentioned that this class

was 'this class' only because of them - they made it so. It wasn't a class with a set agenda, following a set curriculum, planned carefully by the tutor, or with any particular design at all. It could never be repeated actually (Research Diary, 2 February 1999).

Indeed, I felt it was one student in particular whose presence in the group significantly encouraged the collaborative approach to take place. This particular student, John, already had a developed interest in the very issues I was grappling with in my research and therefore we shared common concerns about social change, power and inequality. The other students in the class admired his intellectual ability and confidence and were inspired by his ideas. These complex relationships between co-participants created a unique space for the kinds of experimental and collaborative approaches I have been describing, but also exacerbated at times power inequalities and feelings of intimidation and vulnerability:

Helen said she felt that without any structure at all it made it very difficult for those who were more underconfident to speak out loud in class - she felt that sometimes I was - and John was - 'too deep'. She explained that sometimes this was intimidating and confusing for the rest of the group. John reacted by saying "I knew I should have just shut up" and the group immediately reassured John that they wanted him to speak and were very interested in what he had to say. I asked them if they now regretted the 'experiment' of our class and would have preferred to continue on from plan one when I started to give a lecture on positivism. The answer from the group was a firm "NO!" and Lisa said "we've come too far!" (Research Diary, 9 February 1999).

Despite the continual reflexivity exercised within the group, power imbalances did not disappear, but were more visible and easy to speak about. We developed a classroom where students supported one another, critically examined our relationships and used such lived examples as resources for thinking through the research design for my PhD.

Methods

Interactive Conversations	Auto/biography	Coursework	Diaries	Group Discussion
Hilda				
Marie		Marie		
Nicky			Nicky	
Dorothy	Dorothy		Dorothy	
Vanessa	Vanessa	Vanessa	Vanessa	
Charity				
John				John
Louise	Louise			
Linda				
Sadie	Sadie	Sadie		
Kerry	Kerry		Kerry	
Charlotte				
Mrs Jones	Mrs Jones		Mrs Jones	
Amanda Brown	Amanda		Amanda	
Shelley				Shelley
Vicky		Vicky		
	Kate	Kate		Kate
	Greg	Greg		Greg
				Helen
				Leslie
				Ricky
				Angie
				Lynsey

Figure 3.C: Data Collected

I used a variety of methods to collect data on access education. My selection of methods was influenced by 1) my research aims and questions, 2) theoretical debates within feminism and feminist poststructuralism 3) the tradition of ethnography, and 4) collaboration and discussion with students/participants. The methods of data collection I used were 1) research diary 2) recorded interactive conversations, 3) student diaries, 4) written autobiographies, 5) recorded group discussions, 6) student coursework, 7) examination of national and institutional policy documents.

Research Diary

Over a period of three years (1997-2000), I kept a research diary of my everyday experiences of teaching at Ford College. This focused on my observations of interactions with and between students/participants and with other staff teaching in the same department and included a record of experiences, relationships and dynamics in the classroom, informal discussions in the staff room, formal team meetings and informal chats with students outside of the college. I also wrote about thoughts and observations just following recorded interactive conversations or group discussions. I kept my diary with me at all times whilst in the College and made entries as soon as possible after the moment in concern. During teaching, this often happened either while students were busy in small group discussions or straight after class. In the staff room, I would record relevant discussions as soon as I was alone in the room or at the end of the day. The frequent reliance on memory often precluded verbatim recordings.

I was not only interested in recording my observations of events and interactions in the classroom, but also to map out my own journey through the research, as a teacher/researcher attempting to challenge dominant discourses and practices within the access education department. Furthermore, I was interested in my own relationships with and to staff and students and the emotional structuring of these relationships. These auto/biographical strands within my research diary created a 'thinking space' for me to 'write and reflect through' the resistance, challenges and failures. This intimately connected data collection (keeping a research diary), data analysis (reflecting on my diary), and the act of writing (which always generated thought and analysis) together as overlapping stages.

Inevitably, there are gaps in my diary recordings, and my research diary represents, of necessity, a partial account only. As Bell points out in relation to her own diary entries, the research diary is 'directed to an audience outside the text' (Stanley, 1993: 48), 'relating personal to wider public meanings; this suggests my diary record is incomplete' (Bell, 1998: 82). Furthermore, I alone

have selected the diary entries to include in this final textual version of the research, choices perhaps unconsciously made on the basis of the public nature of producing a thesis, as well as on the basis of their relevance.

More practically, as well as inextricably connected to my values and positionality, it was difficult, particularly in the earlier stages of the research, to identify which were the significant interactions to note in writing. Again such decisions are always shaped by dominant discourses of what it means to produce a piece of research for a PhD. All representations are necessarily partial, incomplete, constructed through available discourses within the public realm and written from the specific position of the author. My observations were constructed through and limited by what I could see as a subject at a particular moment in time and space and with particular understandings of the world around me. These understandings were shaped by my auto/biography, my commitment to feminist politics, my position as a new young lecturer and member of staff, my passionate dedication to my students' access to critical inquiry and knowledge, my gendered subjectivity and so forth. All observational accounts are partial, all are produced through social and cultural dynamics and all are necessarily subjective. If I were to now embark on a fieldwork diary, observing the same classrooms with the same students, my observations would be marked by similarities and differences when compared to my old diary.

Recorded Interactive Conversations

I carried out 'interactive conversations' with individual students. These conversations were tape recorded and then transcribed³. I was inspired by Yvon Appleby's paper arguing for 'interactive conversation', instead of interviews, as a feminist method that generates reflexive and non-exploitative research (Appleby, 1994)⁴. Appleby critiques the strategy of silence, which is upheld as an essential approach to interviewing in traditional social research literature, particularly that rooted in positivism (Fielding, 1993: 150-151). For example, Plummer advises:

The first rule is simply that silence is golden: one should never interrupt a respondent once they are underway (Plummer, 1983: 96 cited in Appleby, 1994: 6).

However, Appleby points out that

Silence in interviews appears to follow non-interactive and non-directive models which conveys powerful messages (Appleby, 1994: 6).

The problem with approaching the interview as a one-way process where the researcher asks questions and the participant provides answers is that it reinforces hierarchical power relations with the interviewer being positioned as expert, and operates to objectify the participant:

Not only is the passage of information one way, as in the traditional interview model, but also disclosure is one way: from the interviewee to the interviewer. The interviewee and their unconsciousness become objectified as the object/s of data (*ibid.*).

Yet, breaking the 'golden rule of silence' feels risky when the dominant discourses of positivism demand that the PhD project follow certain regulatory conventions. My continual anxieties about practising oppositional methods are revealed in my research diary, as are the complexities of occupying the dual position of teacher and researcher.

I feel much more comfortable with the conversational approach rather than the interview approach. Although I realise the necessity of covering some key areas in relation to my research questions, I am very comfortable for the participants to take the lead rather than for me to impose a structure through a set of fixed questions. My voice within the discussion is still a matter of confusion for me though – I am not sure of my role, to what extent I should respond. But I am also aware that because of the existing interactive relationship I have with participants as their tutor, it feels unnatural and wrong not to respond to what they say. (Research diary, 22 June 1999).

My anxiety is rooted in a fear of moving outside the accepted genre of the PhD, where research is seen as a set of step-by-step and stage-by-stage methods in

which objectivity and value-freedom are the ultimate ideal. In the dominant positivist discourse of research methods, using conversation to collect data, with the researcher striving towards reciprocity and disclosing her/his values, experiences and positions, is represented as contaminating, unscientific and invalid (Parr, 1998: 89; Oakley, 1990).

However, there has been a large body of feminist, antiracist, post-colonial and post-structuralist literature critiquing positivism (Paulston, 2000; Usher, 1997; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Lather, 1991; Harding, 1991; Bertaux, 1981). Furthermore, feminist researchers have addressed that they must recognise their own positions as embedded in unequal power relations, particularly as they select, fragment, distort and re/present the stories constructed by participants, an unavoidable part of the research process (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998: 138). Feminists have come to acknowledge that these aspects of research cannot be 'purified' in an attempt to 'make the voices of women heard', simply because they start from 'a feminist standpoint'. 'Pure' knowledge is impossible, whether or not it claims to be feminist, because we un/consciously impose our own meanings and constructions on the 'voices' of the participants.

In connection to such feminist insights and after the first few interviews, I became increasingly convinced that silence was not the golden rule. Because I had an established relationship with students, premised on trust, support, the exchanging of ideas and friendship, it was impossible for me to remain unresponsive to their spoken narratives. To stay quiet, while they shared with me their pain, joy, hopes, fears and feelings of failure and success, would translate into a message that I did not really care about their lives. To become a cold and distanced interviewer when we had already developed a close relationship seemed absurd, dishonest and even cruel. I *did* care about their lives, and they knew me well. They knew my perspectives through the ways that I taught them in the classroom and discussed and negotiated with them our pedagogy. As I read feminist methodological literature (Appleby, 1994; Lather, 1991), I became convinced that non-interaction was inappropriate in my research. Therefore, I represent my meetings with students/participants more as lively conversations and less as interviews. After the first few interviews, I decided to root myself

firmly in a conversation approach, and I would then explicitly explain to participants that we were going to have a conversation rather than an interview.

Written auto/biographies

I became interested in the use of auto/biography as a method of data collection through an engagement with feminist accounts of conducting qualitative and ethnographic research through auto/biography (Birch, 1998: 175; Mauthner, 1998b: 46-49; Stanley, 1993). Feminists have used auto/biography as a method 'to place subjectivity, emotions, memory and analysis of experience, and the link between individual experience and social, political and familial processes, at the centre of personal accounts' (Mauthner, 1998b: 47). The term 'auto/biography', with the slash, reflects the idea that autobiography and biography are intimately connected (Stanley, 1992; Mauthner, 1998b) and refers to *both* the researcher and the researched as co-participants in the process of producing research. As Birch writes in relation to her use of auto/biography in research:

It is through the individual's autobiography that her relationship to public or dominant discourses can be explored. How are knowledge structures retold in the individual's own life stories? It is through my autobiography of the research process that my relationship to sociological discourses can be explored in the construction of the research story that I tell (Birch, 1998: 175).

The use of auto/biography also evolved out of the practice of collaborative approaches to designing the research with Qualitative Research Methods students. Together, over the term, the class examined my research proposal in detail, and thought carefully about the methods to be used in my research project. We considered, for example, approaches to interviewing and the various qualitative methods of collecting people's life stories, which have been used by other researchers. I introduced the idea of written auto/biographies as a method of data collection. We were considering the ways that participants' narratives are constructed in research, and felt that the written auto/biography may create an empowering space for participants to reflexively re/consider and re/present their life stories. Participants, to some extent, would be in control of how, what and when they wrote. I suggested that I could then collect and read through their

stories before meeting them in an interactive conversation, expanding on areas raised in their written auto/biographies.

In practice, this did not happen. Students were busy and pressured with their own courses and most were unable to produce the written autobiography until they appeared for, or following, their interview. Furthermore, many students/participants became anxious about the idea of writing the autobiography, particularly those that came to Return to Study due primarily to worries about their writing skills. I told students/participants that the autobiography was completely optional. I also suggested that they could record their autobiographies by speaking into a tape recorder. No one took this suggestion up. However, some students provided me with the 'personal statements' required on the Return to Study, the Learning Pathway and Access to HE courses, in place of the written auto/biography. In addition to the nine autobiographies written specifically for this research project, I received 7 personal statements. This gave me a total of 16 written accounts about participants' life histories.

When I first approached students with the request of writing an autobiography, I verbally gave very vague guidelines about it being a lifelong account, with no set word length, about significant events that had some relationship to their educational experiences, compulsory and post-compulsory. Some students asked for further clarification in written form, so although initially the idea was to give participants complete control over how and what they wrote, I ended up providing quite specific guidelines at their request (see appendix C). I finally received a variety of styles and sizes, ranging from two sides of A4 to 11 sides of A4. Their written auto/biographies then represent a process of interaction between my guidance, their memory work, and the craft of carefully constructing a piece of writing that is for another person, in this case their tutor.

Student Diaries

Six participants kept diaries of reflections of their classroom experiences. The use of student diaries or journals is well known within feminist pedagogical approaches (Magezis, 1996; Maher and Tetreault, 1994;). I encouraged students to use diaries as a reflexive approach to learning, explaining to them that keeping a journal of their experiences at college would help them to reflect on themselves as learners, developing their self-awareness, reviewing class sessions and critically evaluating learning experiences and classroom dynamics more systematically.

The use of diaries therefore had a dual purpose, the first being pedagogical and the second methodological. Diaries have been used within feminist research as a tool for collecting auto/biographies (Bell, 1997: 72). Yet, 'each diary entry - unlike life histories - is sedimented into a particular moment in time: they do not emerge "all at once" as reflections on the past, but day by day strive to record an ever-changing present' (Plummer, 1990: 17 - 18 in Bell, 1997: 73). Such an approach was useful in gaining insight to the 'ever-changing' experience of being an access student at a particular moment in space and time. I could therefore attempt to access participants' immediate expressions of how they felt about particular lessons, classroom dynamics and relationships, subject areas and themselves as 'learners'. Of course, as with written auto/biographies, students constructed diary entries with me in mind, their imaginary (and real) mode of address (Ellsworth, 1997). This inextricably shaped their writing, simultaneously a personal reflection, yet also created for the public realm as part of the research project. The power dynamics and identity formations inherent in such writing processes therefore required close consideration as I analysed data.

Students were aware that I was using diaries as a research tool and that it was not an assessed piece of coursework. Hence they tended to prioritise other (assessed) work. I understood and respected that such priorities had to be made as a necessity. Students were juggling many responsibilities at once, and I expressed to them repeatedly that they should only contribute to my research in the ways they felt were manageable in their busy lives. The six students who did

manage to keep diaries seemed to enjoy the process, but also appeared to view it as a requirement, despite my efforts to tell them differently. Again, this points up ethical dilemmas and reveals the unequal relationship that is reinforced when a teacher shifts positions to research her own students. Often when I invited participants to contribute to my research in a particular way, they interpreted this as a mandatory task set by their tutor, rather than the non-obligatory request it was, made outside of their responsibilities as students. This reveals the impossibility of completely stepping outside of dominant practices and positions and the ways that we are continually re-constituted through these.

Recorded Group Discussions

I tape recorded four group discussions while teaching at Ford College part-time over the academic year 1998/1999. The first was between four co-participants, three Research Methods students, John, Leslie and Helen, and myself, and was unstructured. This recorded session was planned collaboratively in the Research Methods class. My research diary traces the evolution of this research strategy:

We⁵ considered the group interview today, and I suggested that we have a group interview about our course on the final session. They were enthused. Should I set the questions? This led them into a reflection about our course, because they said they just loved the openness of it. Helen said "the openness of this class is the reason I'd rather be sitting here than anywhere else". They all felt that the lack of agenda had been a great benefit to our open exploration of various issues to do with research and education. However, we all felt that now, for the second half of the term, we needed to pull everything together, to return to the main agenda with a bit more structure.

So we decided that in terms of the group interview, some format of open questions was needed. I then suggested, on the basis that they had examined my PhD research proposal and spent the last 5 weeks discussing my research, that they set the questions for the group interview. This led us into a discussion into the importance of involving all research participants - the researcher and the researched - in the development of the research project at all stages, with the

aim of disrupting traditional hierarchical relationships between researcher and researched. We recognised the parallels between teacher/student and researcher/participant, and methodology and pedagogy, and discussed this for awhile. After some discussion, we finally decided that each of us would contribute questions, which we would bring in two weeks, and then collectively select questions for our group interview (Research diary, 23 February 1999).

However, our plans did not follow through. When we met two weeks later, the students had not remembered to bring in a list of questions. Initially, I felt disappointed, but upon reflection, it pointed out a few important issues to me. The project ultimately was mine, not theirs, and I had far more to gain from it (a doctoral degree) than they did. Although the students/participants were keen to collaborate during their scheduled Research Methods class, asking students/participants to invest personal time was an imposition, *even when they themselves had suggested it*. Although while physically in the classroom they felt enthusiastic about our ideas and making contributions, once they left the classroom they understandably became engrossed in other areas of their lives demanding their time and attention. This made sense because my PhD was much more important in *my* life than in *theirs*. So although we appeared to be working collaboratively, my relationship to the project was completely different from theirs. This helped explain why many participants never produced diaries or written autobiographies either. It was important that I addressed the issue that I had much more to gain from investing time in the research project than they did. Therefore, our collaborative approaches were always limited and had to account for these different levels of investment and benefit.

We finally decided that due to our continual meeting about the research over a period of 10 weeks, we did not need any set questions. Four of us met the following week and plunged into an unstructured recorded discussion about our experiences of the Research Methods course. Helen suggested that we could always try again or add on later if this was necessary.

I then arranged for two more group interviews, to represent Return to Study and Women's Studies. Three participants from each course agreed to meet at my

house for the recorded group discussion. Only two showed up for the Return to Study discussion (Greg and Ricky). All three participants came for the Women's Studies group discussion. For both of these discussions, I created a short list of areas I would like to discuss (see appendix D), but suggested that these be put aside for reference only if we felt we needed them. As it happens, because the lists were available, we did use them, but very loosely. The discussions developed into a semi-structured interview format combined at moments with an unstructured approach.

Fielding (1993: 141-142) argues that group discussions 'allow you to see how people interact in considering a topic, and how they react to disagreement'. The gendered dynamics of interaction and reaction is revealed through my research diary observations of the two group discussions outlined above:

The most interesting difference from last week's Women's Studies group discussion was that the two men students did not interact with each other much at all. Instead they would speak to me – eye contact with me exclusively – almost like two individual interviews were going on simultaneously. There was a brief acknowledgement of what the other had said, but not much interchange – and from their body language, I felt that one lost interest while the other was speaking. This made me feel like making much more effort to pull the silent one back into the discussion, while trying also to listen and take full interest in what the speaking one was saying. This was awkward.

The second interesting point is that the two male Return to Study students said very different things about their perceptions of the course, although there was never an open challenge of the other's opinion. In contrast, participants in the Women's Studies group discussion openly challenged one another's views, saying on several occasions 'I don't agree with you' (Research Diary, 22.6.99).

The use of group discussions reveals more than student perceptions and experiences of their access course. It reveals the social dynamics in operation between participants and the ways that research relations are gendered. Such

insights into the operation of power in research are invaluable in the project to subvert traditional research relations.

At the end of the academic year 1998/1999, when Women's Studies was drawing to a close, the students expressed a desire to continue to meet. We decided to organise our own Women's group and arranged a first meeting at my house. This meeting represented a celebration of the year, with lots of lovely food, music and laughter. We then met about three months later, again at my house because of the convenient location near to the College. The women were speaking about their new courses, government policies, future plans, and I could not resist the opportunity to record this rich discussion. I asked their permission and they were all keen, so I set up the tape recorder. During this impromptu recorded group discussion, I explained to them my current analysis of data, and they responded with their analyses. Such discussions stimulated my re/thinking and understanding about data and were invaluable in the project to develop collaborative research approaches.

<i>Students from:</i>	<i>Approach</i>	<i>Participants</i>
Qualitative Research methods	Unstructured	Helen, John, Leslie, PB
Return to Study	Semi-Structured	Greg, Ricky, PB
Women's Studies	Semi-structured	Kate, Shelley, Lynsey, PB
Women's Group	Impromptu unstructured	Kate, Angie, Lynsey, PB

Figure 3.D Recorded group discussions

Student Coursework

I requested a copy of any student coursework that related to the themes of this study. Return to Study consists of several units that requires students to practise self-reflection in relation to their decision to commit themselves to adult study. In the first unit, students write about significant events leading up to their decision to return to education, as well as an educational action plan for the next year. On the Personal Efficacy unit they write about their hopes and fears and strengths and weaknesses, and in the Time Management element of Study Skills they must reconsider the priorities in their lives. All of these themes have direct

relevance to my research questions. Indeed my exposure to student coursework in the early stages of the research prompted critical reflection in relation to my reading and thinking, and led ultimately to the rethinking of research questions and aims before I came to the intense stage of fieldwork.

The coursework also supplemented the number of written autobiographies produced, and contributed extra information about students' biographies and attitudes to access education.

Examination of national and institutional policy

Over the period that I have conducted this research, widening educational participation has been a central concern of New Labour, leading to the creation of key policy documents that have a direct impact on the access courses at Ford College (Kennedy, 1997; DfEE, 1998; DfEE, 1999). It was therefore vital that I located my research within the context of burgeoning policy on widening educational participation.

The national policy directly affected College policy, and the School of Adult Community Education was the most obvious focus of policy makers and managers in the College because of its explicit concern to widen access. As I was Return to Study Programme Manager and conducting doctoral research on access education, I was selected as a College representative of widening educational participation. This led to my seat on senior management's 'Learning Age Committee', which was highly unconventional, as I was the only lecturer involved. This membership enabled me to contribute to the policy making to some limited extent, and to be privy to key documents and the thinking of senior management in the College regarding widening educational participation. I recorded my observations of the Learning Age meetings and kept a file of all documentation received and discussed.

I was also involved, of course, in my own team meetings. The team consisted of four Return to Study tutors, including myself. Finally I attended all School and Faculty meetings, where widening participation was a constant theme due to

national and institutional pressures. Again, I recorded my observations of all meetings, kept all documentation received, and filed all minutes of meetings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis poses particular problems for feminist ethnographic research that is committed to collaborative, interactive and non-exploitative approaches. One dilemma is embedded in the selective and interpretative aspects of data analysis. As the researcher selects, interprets and re-presents the data, the intended meanings of participants inevitably become distorted and reshaped. Data analysis is an isolated process, particularly when working within the traditional framework for completing a PhD, and requires the slicing of raw data into a coding scheme, dividing participants' voices into pieces of text grouped by themes and consistencies.

Although I examined the data for themes and consistencies, I also looked for inconsistencies and contradictions. Contradictions and inconsistencies highlighted complexities, shifting subjectivities, transforming discourses and multiple identifications. Drawing on feminist and feminist poststructural theory, I used the data to modify and challenge theory, rather than simply to prove it, taking a 'corrective' approach (Skeggs, 1995b: 195). For example, the data revealed that although participants were positioned and constituted through discourse, they were also active subjects producing themselves within and against hegemonic discourses. Similarly, although participants' lives were structurally constrained, they actively made choices that disrupted patriarchal and capitalist social structures. However, within structural theory 'the conscious subject is displaced from the centre of understanding' (Jones, 1997) Similarly, much poststructuralist theory denies the presence of individual agency by arguing that 'everything is mediated by language and meaning' (Jones, 1997). The auto/biographies of participants throw these theories into question, because, for instance, if white working-class women's lives are determined by structures or discourses, how might we explain their active decisions to return to education or to take up feminist subject positions?

Data analysis as process

Much traditional literature presents data analysis as a distinct stage in research following fieldwork and preceding 'writing-up'. This does not represent my experience of the research process, which was characterised by what Becker terms 'sequential analysis' (Becker, 1971). In this approach, analysis is on-going and overlapping, each progression in the research shaping the next. I analysed data while reading, writing, discussing, observing, reflecting, conducting fieldwork, transcribing, rereading and rewriting. Analysis was not a distinct stage in the research, but rather a process that extended before, over and beyond the life of the thesis itself. My conceptual and analytical engagement with the field of access education began as an Access student myself, as I identified it as the focus of my PhD thesis, as I wrote a proposal and continued through the fieldwork, literature review, transcribing, rereading, discussing and writing about the data. As themes emerged through such analysis, I re/entered into discussions with students about their thinking of these themes. I used the space of the classroom as a critical arena to discuss themes emerging from the data with participants. Our discussions centred on themes such as decisions to return to study, the purpose of education, pedagogy and classroom dynamics, intimidation and exclusion(s), changes, choices and identity. This active and interactive process led to the reformulation of research questions, shifting the focus of my recorded conversations/discussions with participants. This enabled all participants, including myself, to practise a reflexivity in relation to what students said, what I thought they said and the theoretical frameworks I used, as well as the knowledge we generated together through the research process. My approach therefore represented an on-going conversation within the realm of access education in its various forms; theoretical texts, empirical studies, classroom relations/ships, discussion between co-participants inside and outside the classroom, auto/biography, engagement with policy, and the collective production of ideas.

The friendships I formed with participants enriched the development of collaborative approaches to data analysis. During casual meetings, including

chats over coffee, on the telephone, in the school playground, or in the local supermarket, I often 'checked out' my thinking about data with them.

Kerry asked me if our recorded meeting was of help and I explained to her just how helpful it was. I told her that after listening to her tape again, I realised she continually spoke of 'fear' and 'intimidation' in relation to education. She had described a huge change when she stood up to her sociology tutor, who told her she was 'wrong' to believe that instinct and intuition exists, and told him, "well, that is your opinion". I summarised my analysis of her comments and experiences, and she totally agreed with my interpretation saying "exactly, exactly!" She said that she felt the middle classes did not need to mention class, because they were secure in their position, and had nothing to prove. They just were accepted as they were. She argued it is different for working class people.

We spoke about how her knowledge and experiences were just as valuable as anyone else's, and she said now she knows this to be true. We talked about women's knowledge of 'intuition' and the male academic rejection of that. I thanked her for helping me to recognise the importance of 'fear' and 'intimidation' and she said "I am so glad I could help you and you can chat to me anytime for help, because you have helped me through so much" (Research diary, 2 December 1999).

In our casual meetings, participants appeared to be relaxed while discussing the data with me. This often led to my rethinking and modifying the analysis, forming a strategy for developing interactive analysis that had a significant effect on the final textual version of the research.

Dilemmas in collaborative analysis

I wanted my research to go through a process of collaborative analysis. Again this raised particular dilemmas, for example, the issue of differential 'access to discursive resources' (Skeggs, 1995: 201). Although I wanted the research to be marked by collaboration throughout, there were constraints, including the fact that I had access through higher education to sociological explanations and

participants did not (*ibid.*). Initially, I wanted to hold discussions with groups of participants about sections of my written work that analysed pieces of data. However, I realised this may generate feelings of intimidation and anxiety, because penetration of my writings required an understanding of the theoretical frameworks I drew on. It was very important to me that I wrote the thesis in an accessible way, so that students and practitioners could engage with it.

Today Dorothy came over for a chat. I shared selections of Chapter Seven with her, particularly because I wanted her feedback about how I analysed her accounts. After she read through parts of the Chapter, she expressed her agreement with my analysis and also commented that she was surprised by how easy it was to read. She explained that she expected it to be 'really academic' and therefore impossible to understand. (Research Diary, October 2000)

However, certain moments of dealing with complex ideas limited the possibility of fully achieving an open text. Often it felt more comfortable to discuss ideas, rather than to present to participants pieces of the thesis, which had after all to meet the criteria of the academy. The contradictory imperatives of writing accessibly for participants and writing for the academy reveal some of the ambiguities and contradictions for the feminist researcher conducting a PhD

Moments of sharing data analysis happened spontaneously, over the telephone, in unplanned meetings in the local community, during friendly visits or just before or after a lesson. It also happened during class sessions, as I brought up themes or ideas that related to our class topics, drawing students into analytical discussions about the data summarised in abstract terms to ensure anonymity. Of course, the act of summary immediately involved my re-presentation of the data, and so participants were given *my interpretation of data*, rather than data. However, I felt there were serious ethical dilemmas about bringing 'real' pieces of data into the classroom. I did not want anyone to feel exposed and it would have been easy to recognise an individual belonging to a specific piece of data, because everyone knew each other quite well. With such concerns, I felt it was too risky to bring raw data into the classroom.

I recorded and reflected on the individual and classroom informal conversations/discussions in my research diary. However, the collaboration was less systematic than I had originally envisaged and therefore the analysis belonged mostly to me, as the author of the thesis.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have traced the stages of the research process, while emphasising that these stages were never distinct, but always overlapping and impossible to fully control. I have discussed the research design in detail, outlining the methods employed and describing the research participants. Highlighting the key significance of collaborative approaches to my research, I have carefully examined the dilemmas emerging from such approaches. Collaboration took place at all stages of the research, but was also limited by factors such as unequal levels of involvement in and benefit from the project. These issues were addressed in this chapter, paying close attention to power relations and positionality.

I have also uncovered the intricacies of the research process and the ways my own contradictory and multiple subject positions overlapped, clashed and enriched each other. Placing auto/biography as a central theme in my study, I have considered the complex relations/ships that profoundly shaped the ethnography and the knowledge produced non/collaboratively through it. Although committed to conducting research that attempts to disrupt unequal power relations, this has not always been possible. All participants in the research, including myself, had moments of feeling vulnerable and exposed. It was ultimately my responsibility, as PhD researcher, to decide which data to select and which to discard, and therefore I had to continually exercise reflexivity in terms of issues of power relations and ethics. This often meant negotiating a contradictory set of interests and, in order to produce a thesis, making decisions as the author-ity of this project and in opposition to my key aim of collaboration. As a complex process, collaboration was 'always on the edge of destabilizing' conventional power relations between researcher and researched, teacher and student (Hey, 2000:163). Therefore this ethnography

created important moments of the temporary reconfiguration of power relations through collaborative attempts. I will continue to consider themes of collaboration, interaction and em/power/ment in relation to pedagogy in the following chapter.

Notes for Chapter Three

¹ Although public, private and personal overlap and cannot be neatly separated out, I will attempt to explain the conceptual differences between them. Public includes formal organisations such as FE colleges and Open College Networks. Private includes the domestic sphere of the family and mothering, for example. Personal represents the individual 'I' (Mauthner, 1998: 40-42).

² It is important to point out that these research questions were re/formulated through our discussions and were never posed in the classroom in precisely these words. These final research questions are in my words only.

³ Some transcripts were word-processed, but later I found handwriting the transcripts a more creative and thought-provoking approach.

⁴ Ethnographic approaches generally favour a conversational approach rather than formal interviewing (Fielding, 1993: 157).

⁵ It should be noted that the use of the pronoun 'we' in my research diary represents *my perception* of group dynamics only. It may be that some students would dispute the inclusion of themselves in these discussions represented by the use of 'we', but I have attempted to be reflexive about the use of 'we', 'I' and 'they' in order to provide a 'true' account of 'our' discussions.

Chapter Four: Pedagogy Matters in Widening Educational Participation

[Drawing on real life experiences] really helps because you have lots of examples from other people in the class and it makes it real. At the moment I feel I'm going in and just copying off the board - like at school. Just writing down and not really understanding - it reminds one of being at school (Louise, recorded conversation, 1999).

Introduction

In this chapter I examine the discourse of widening educational participation as used widely by New Labour in its vision of the 'learning age' in relation to pedagogy. I argue that although there appears to be a consensus around the concept of widening educational participation, a closer examination reveals a tension between the ideology of access education and the policy of central government. The fact that government ministers are speaking directly about, and apparently on behalf of, widening educational participation, makes the discourse of New Labour almost irresistibly seductive, closing the spaces previously searched for and strategically utilised to subvert macro and micro policy into critical and feminist pedagogical practices. I look closely at the tensions between macro discourse on widening participation, which claims to be about confronting social exclusion, and feminist pedagogy, which draws on a vision of social change and justice.

I argue that a close and reflexive examination of pedagogy is imperative to *any* project that seeks to widen access. I look specifically at the affects of dominant discourses on pedagogical practices used in the access education classrooms at 'Ford' College, examining the problems created by an overemphasis on assessment standardisation as well as the complexities that critical pedagogical approaches tend to overlook. My assertion is that feminist post/structural theory provides a framework to account for such complexities, and to develop local and contingent

approaches to pedagogy that are not fixed but always changing according to context. This requires a deregulation of access teachers' pedagogical practices and a focus on the diverse perspectives of access students.

Critical and Feminist Pedagogy - From Theory to Practice

My work as an access teacher¹, and more generally much work within access education (Thompson, 2000; Barr, 1999), has been significantly influenced by critical pedagogy theory. During the term that I taught the Qualitative Research Methods class (see Chapter Three), I was deeply involved in thinking through Paulo Freire's ideas in his famous book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972). Freire's ideas were developed through his practical work teaching literacy to adults in South America and Africa (O'Malley, 1997). Freire argues that 'banking education', conventional education based on teacher authority and student passivity, objectifies students, reinforcing the power and values of the oppressor. Freire believed the oppressed were unaware of the true nature of social relationships under capitalism and this 'false consciousness' helped oppressive social conditions and 'dehumanisation' to persist (Barr, 1999:14; Freire, 1972). The pedagogue should therefore attempt to assist students in understanding the concrete conditions of their daily lives (Aronowitz, 1993: 9), a practice he called 'conscientization', the process of becoming aware of structures of oppression leading to a commitment to end that oppression (Weiler, 1994: 17). The interaction between the pedagogue ('revolutionary leader') and the oppressed, through dialogue, will, Freire contended, transform their knowledge of the world leading finally to the utopian vision of liberation for all peoples.

There are similarities between the Freirean view and early (second wave) feminist perspectives. Many feminists also believed in a solidarity between the oppressed, based on the shared experience of being a woman, which could be understood through consciousness-raising groups where personal experience was shared towards the building of theory for political action. The goal of that political action

was 'liberation', however this (Western white) feminist concept of 'liberation' was often not recognised as located within specific social, cultural and historical contexts and discourses. For example, the assumptions of the superiority of rationality, autonomy and unity between women were often not questioned and no one asked *whose* model of utopia feminists were striving towards. There was a lack of reflexivity in that feminists often failed to address their own location in the very social relations they were attempting to challenge (Maher and Tetreault, 1994; Weiler, 1994: 33). Both Freirean and feminist theory produced a theoretical model of oppression positing a simple binary of power (oppressor-oppressed). The idea that 'the oppressed', once reaching a level of rational enlightenment through conscientisation, will work together to change the social world, 'ignore[s] the possibility of the contradictory experience of oppression among the oppressed' (Barr, 1999: 15). Attempts to implement critical or feminist pedagogical theory without a reflection of how both the teacher and students are embedded in the very social inequalities and relationships they are attempting to disrupt, only perpetuates relations of domination (Johnson, 1997; Maher and Tetreault, 1994; Weiler, 1994:33; Ellsworth, 1992).

I seized the opportunity to experiment with critical pedagogy in the Qualitative Research Methods class where students were keen to work with me on my thesis. My idea was to use the space of the classroom to develop both my research methodology and students' understanding of research processes, while also developing the central themes of my research through our classroom practices. To be more precise, I wanted to articulate the connections between my dual role as researcher and teacher and their dual role as students and participants. I saw the Qualitative Research Methods class as an opportunity to work through the connections between epistemology, methodology, pedagogy and practice in collaboration with students/respondents. As both a teacher and researcher, I wanted to understand how, through this kind of research, our collaborative work as co-participants might contribute to the field of critical pedagogy and access education. I was largely influenced by the collaborative work carried out by Ellsworth and her students in their classroom (Ellsworth, 1992).

Elizabeth Ellsworth writes about her experiences of facilitating a course premised on collaboration with students, which was organised in response to the increased visibility of racist acts and structures at University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she is a professor (Ellsworth, 1992). The course represented an attempt at collectively intervening 'against campus racism and traditional educational forms at the university' (Ellsworth, 1992: 90). An aim of the project was to investigate with a group of students how racist structures and practices operated at the university, 'with what effects and contradictions - and where they were vulnerable to political opposition' (*ibid.*:92). Her paper describes the limitations and failure of critical pedagogy to practically cope with such aims and she argues that theories of critical pedagogy represent 'repressive myths' that perpetuate rather than transform relations of dominance. Her key argument is that critical pedagogy theory fails to locate itself within concrete classroom practices, 'consistently strip[ping] discussions of classroom practices of historical context and political position' (*ibid.*:92).

She uses the descriptor 'critical' as an example of the ambiguity characteristic of critical pedagogy theory, which operates to hide a political agenda, by avoiding language such as anticlassism, antiracism and anti(hetero)sexism. This 'posture of invisibility' results in a lack of clear articulation of the need for political action through education. Her insights can be applied to the coded language used within the field of access education - primarily with the term 'access', which implies a commitment to equal opportunities rather than a specific political agenda to challenge and subvert the androcentrism and eurocentrism of the education system. This has enabled the expropriation of 'access education' into the initiative to widen educational participation, distorting a radical educational project into one that supports the political agenda of the New Right and the Third Way, to the great jeopardy of those already vulnerable to poverty, marginalisation and cultural misrecognition (Fraser, 1997; Hart, 1992; see Chapter Two).

Ellsworth's paper inspired me to pursue collaborative approaches in the classroom and in my research, working with students/participants to deconstruct the dominant discourses of teaching and learning, as well as the discourses of critical pedagogy. In our Research Methods classroom, I wanted to test out whether or not we felt that critical pedagogical approaches were experienced as repressive. I also wanted to explore the value of teacher-as-researcher projects, for both the subjects involved and for the field of access education more generally. I was reluctant to dismiss Freire's ideas as repressive without experimenting with them in practice. I suspected that critical pedagogical approaches would not only be experienced as repressive, but would be experienced as both repressive and emancipatory by different subjects at different times or even by one subject at the same moment.

Theorising Complexities with/in Classroom Practices

One of the key concepts of critical pedagogy is 'student voice' (McLaren and Lankshear, 1994; McLaren and Leonard, 1993; Freire, 1972). This concept places great importance on the idea of a student-centred approach in the classroom. Curriculum, pedagogy, and materials are expected to be directly responsive to students' needs². Teachers and researchers strive to 'make the voices of students' heard, with research committed solely to describing the experiences of students who have previously been excluded from educational opportunities, in an attempt to make groups of students' voices 'heard' in the academic world (Merrill, 1996; Rosen, 1990; Moss, 1987). Such research has often been carried out along simplistic lines of gender or race, ignoring the ways that class, dis/ability, gender, race, and sexuality intersect, and neglecting the complexity of identity as multiple, fragmented, shifting and positional. Furthermore, such an approach ignores issues of selection, interpretation and the social process of constructing 'a voice' through available discourses. In Chapter Three I discussed the problematic of using the concept 'experience' without recognition of the ways that it too is socially constructed, and constitutive of contradictory discourses.

Feminist post/structural theorists have critiqued categories of identity as fixed and final (e.g. 'woman' 'lesbian' 'white') which build obstacles to the 'denaturalisation of ourselves' and in possibilities for change (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 1997; Orner, 1992: 74), while maintaining the importance of these categories through the concept of positionality (Alcoff, 1988). The fixed, essential self of humanist discourses is revealed as a fantasy, ignoring the complexities and fluidity of subjectivity and power. Feminist post/structuralists attempt to engage with the unconscious processes, pleasures and desires we often deny or ignore, recognising that subjects are always in the process of 'becoming' and are constitutive of discourse (Orner, 1992: 79; Hall, 1992; see Chapter 6). The humanist concept of 'student voice' overlooks 'the mediating aspects of language and the unconscious' (Orner, 1992: 80; see also Ellsworth, 1997). Moreover, it has been pointed out that 'silence' does not always reflect a loss of power or a position of oppression (Ellsworth, 1992; Orner, 1992). Students often actively choose to remain silent (see Chapter Five), although silence does not always simplistically translate into resistance either. Moving away from rather simplistic binary opposites of silence/voice, oppressed/liberated, feminist post/structuralism addresses the micro-power relations that shape the intricate dynamics of the specific contexts of different classrooms.

As Valerie Walkerdine (1987) uncovers in her research on nursery aged children, the pedagogical attempt to 'give voice' or 'expression' to 'the oppressed' does not always simply operate in the ways that we imagine theoretically. Using an extract from a series of recordings made in a nursery classroom, she reveals the way 3 year-old boys can exercise power over their female teacher through 'constituting her as the powerless object of sexist discourse' (Walkerdine, 1987:167). She argues that '[p]articular individuals are produced as subjects differently within a variety of discursive practices' (*ibid.*). Her research demonstrates that power does not operate in a simple dualism of powerful/powerless, in the way that critical pedagogy theory assumes. Teachers and students

are not unitary subjects uniquely positioned, but produced as a nexus of subjectivities, in relations of power which are constantly shifting, rendering them at one moment powerful and at another powerless (*ibid.*: 166).

Furthermore, Mimi Orner (1992) points out the danger of critical pedagogues believing themselves to be 'liberators' and 'givers of power'. This ignores the ways that they are situated and immersed in the same social formations and relationships as everyone else (Flax, 1995: 145). This also ignores the differential positions of power occupied by students, and places the teacher in the position of superior rescuer, single-handedly leading students to value themselves, to construct their identities and make 'the right' choices. '[S]table notions of self and identity are based on exclusion and secured by terror' (Orner, 1992: 86). The establishment of fixed categories within the classroom necessarily generates exclusions and vulnerability. Students may feel coerced into placing themselves into a fixed category for fear of not belonging.

The positing of these conceptions such that only one perspective can be correct (or properly feminist) reveals, among other things, the embeddedness of feminist theory in the very processes we are trying to critique and our need for a more systematic and self-conscious theoretical practice (Flax, 1995: 153).

Flax's point was made real to me during a Women's Studies class when I asked students to discuss differences between women in small groups. This extract from my research diary reveals some of the conflicts and anxieties that occurred as a result of the feminist critical pedagogical approaches I employed in my classroom practice:

Difficult session...we split up into groups of 3 to discuss and consider differences between women. I overheard the discussion of one group and one woman in particular who was complaining that she did not agree with anything that had taken place in the class so far, that she could not relate to feminism at all and that she did not in any way feel that she was disadvantaged as a woman. [This particular woman had disclosed to the class on another occasion that she had recently fled

from a violent marriage and now was struggling to raise her child on her own]. She sounded very angry with the other women in the class and complained that we had spoken about our personal problems that she did not want to know about. I felt myself reacting to her words, and had to take deep breaths to calm down.

Later in the session when we reconvened, I said that I had overheard some important issues being discussed about difference in one particular group, to prompt her to share her criticisms with the rest of the class. I said that I hoped everyone felt they had a right to speak in the class, and that we would not all agree with each other all the time. Indeed this is what the session was about. She spoke up, explaining that she felt silenced because she seemed to feel differently to everyone else in the room. I responded by saying this was an example of why feminism must address difference between women. However, she then upset many women in the class by naming someone else “stupid” for speaking about her personal experiences. I was so shocked at this verbal abuse that I did not directly respond. After the session, another student approached me and expressed her feeling that now we would all be too afraid to speak honestly about our experiences as women (Friday, 16 October 1998).

My incapacity to defend the student at the end of another student's verbal abuse, or indeed to uphold the importance of addressing women's experiences as valuable resources for reconstructing theory, illustrates the way that power dynamics constantly shift as subjects are constituted through discursive practices. This student employed the discourse of 'appropriate public behaviour' to shame all other members of the group for stepping outside of the boundaries of felicitous talk in a formal educational institution. I was included in her shaming of the group, because as I had not behaved within the discourse of the professional lecturer, I no longer signified the lecturer subject position. The discourse of critical pedagogy was disrupted on that occasion, and no one, including myself, could rescue or defend our feminist classroom practice on that particular day.

Yet this story could be read differently. The discourse of feminism operated to silence this student who could/would not relate her personal experiences to the theoretical explanations of feminism(s). Not feeling a connection with the category 'feminist' she felt silenced and marginalised by the pedagogical practices that I, as the teacher, had the power to impose on her in the classroom context. The narrative reveals the complexities of power relations, resistance and oppression. As Gore points out, it is crucial that teachers address the authority they exercise in their practice, because all pedagogical approaches circulate power that is potentially both emancipatory *and* repressive (Gore, 1993: 126). In the teaching of Women's Studies, I used my institutional position of authority as a source of power to develop what I hoped would be emancipatory pedagogical practices to alter classroom power relations. However, it is clear that not all students at all times experienced the course as emancipatory. The complexities of power relations and discursive practices prompt feminist teachers to seriously and continually re/examine the dilemmas facing critical classroom practice. Yet, this does not undermine the importance of continuing to develop feminist pedagogical practices for the access education project. It does pose the imperative to reflexively re/consider our ideas, practices, locations and relationships.

In order to guard against the possibility that our own critical, feminist, social reconstructionist, or poststructuralist discourses would simply replace earlier discourses within the same institutions and disciplines, it is important to continuously and vigilantly carry out the work of re-assembling, recommencement, critical renewal (Gore, 1993: 155).

Mainstream Discourses of Widening Educational Participation

While feminists and critical theorists have struggled with the concept of pedagogy, it has been increasingly absent from concerns within further and adult education, largely driven by the narrow confines of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) methodology. Currently, the existence of political struggles within education are being denied, as the dominant discourse of the market is prioritised (Power and Whitty, 1999; Benn, Elliott and Whaley, 1998; Hey, 1996; Kenway and

Epstein, 1996; Skeggs, 1995; Ball, 1994; Whitty, Edwards and Gerwitz, 1993; see Chapter Two). In this setting, I would argue that debates about pedagogy are largely lost through an overwhelming concern with standards. For example, David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment argues that:

Standards are at the very heart of creating equality (DfEE, 8 March 1999).

And as John Randall, Chief Executive of QAA, asserts:

Access matters because standards matter (Randall, 1998).

Over recent years, the concern to widen educational participation has become a key issue in national policy, often guided by the Government's incentive to modernise the welfare state:

Learning is essential to a strong economy and an inclusive society. In offering a way out of dependency and low expectation, it lies at the heart of the Government's welfare reform programme (DfEE, February 1998: 11).

The market principles of neo-liberalism, and the popularised assumption that the welfare state has created a 'culture of dependency' (Giddens, 1997; see Chapter Two) have moulded such a project. Widening educational participation has become a movement striving to place the unemployed in work using 'education' as a gateway to employment. Therefore, the emphasis now is on the attainment of specific skills (Basic and Key) and on raising literacy to improve the standard of the British workforce. In Chapter Two, I explored the possible consequences of such policy on the lives of those in already powerless positions. Such policy also impacts heavily on pedagogical practices, leading to utilitarian kinds of competence-based teaching and learning (Johnson, 1997), while closing the spaces available to speak and think about anticlassist, anti(hetero)sexist and antiracist pedagogy.

In the mainstream discourse, there is a growing emphasis on individual responsibility, which is encapsulated in the government's newest initiative of 'education for citizenship' (DfEE, 1999). This discourse of 'citizenship' differs from that found in the discursive field of access. Although on the surface there appears to be similarities, a deeper examination reveals that there are inherent tensions. In the radical access discourse, for example, 'citizenship' is about critical education which teaches students to analyse power and the roots of power so that they can actively participate in and transform society (Mayo, 1997: 124). In the mainstream discourse, citizenship is conceptualised as relating to individual rights and responsibilities (*ibid.*: 123). This is illustrated by Blunkett's words:

Through raising standards in education and a strong focus on citizenship we can achieve our vision. That is why self-reliance, self-determination and mutual support are all part of the same endeavour, to use the talents of the individuals to the benefits of the whole community' (Blunkett in DfEE, 8 March 1999; see also DfEE, February, 1998).

Individual rights and responsibilities in this discourse appear to be about the national economy. For example, throughout government policy documents, a great emphasis is repeatedly placed on educating individuals as an investment in human capital:

Investment in human capital will be key to business success in the knowledge-based economy of the 21st century, Education and Employment Secretary David Blunkett said today. Mr Blunkett said there is now a real challenge to quantify investment in human skill and creativity. He called on the accountancy profession and investment analysts to take a lead in devising new ways of measuring knowledge and creativity, not just plant and equipment. Speaking at the annual public lecture of the Centre for Policy Studies in Education at the University of Leeds, Mr Blunkett said: "Knowledge is now wealth and power. Microsoft is so valuable, not because of its fixed assets, but because of the human capital of its software engineers and programmers. Each of its employees is 'worth' about £6.6 million... It is not only individuals, but businesses that must embrace a learning culture which will be the key to developing human capital. This will be about partnerships - Government, business and individuals pooling resources together - to underline the importance of learning, which today is the key to employability, job security and higher earnings". (DfEE, 11 March 1999)

The tensions between central policy on widening participation and access education ideology has in some ways undermined the early understandings of 'why and for whom we wish to widen participation' (Diamond, 1999: 188). Furthermore, it has pushed issues of pedagogy, that have previously been at the heart of access measures, to the background of discussions that are now concerned with standards, systems and frameworks.

From the Margins to the Centre

The transition of access education from the margins of post-compulsory education to the centre of national policy and the achievements made by the Access movement in this light deserve recognition and celebration. Reflecting its position as a programme with national currency and status, Access to Higher Education is now regulated by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). Such key developments have also combined with other forms of, perhaps less positive, changes that have altered the discourse of widening participation.

In its beginnings, a particularly strong strand of the access movement was driven by a politics against oppression and for social change, with a firm commitment to redressing the balance following the legacy of institutional classism, racism and sexism. Feminist, antiracist and anti(hetero)sexist pedagogical approaches were central to many Access to Higher Education programmes striving to widen participation. Driven by local and heterogeneous needs, Access education was practitioner led, with a great variance and flexibility in terms of the kinds of (student-centred) provision available throughout the country (Clarke, 1999; Maxwell, 1996). The approach to access education:

meant that provision could be designed to meet local needs and be responsive both to the expertise of staff and to the local communities in which provision was based. It allowed for Access programmes to be linked to local HE institutions or be separate from them. It allowed for varieties in the organisation of the curriculum and for experimentation in the way programmes were constructed. *In particular, it specifically rejected the conventional A-level*

approach to teaching and learning. In those early days, part of the dialogue between Access practitioners focussed on the extent to which Access was a means to effect change within HE itself (Diamond, 1999: 186; emphasis added).

The early to mid 1990's saw a huge expansion in Access to Higher Education (Clarke, 1999; Diamond, 1999: 186). This was triggered by the legitimisation of Access through the arrival of the kitemark (Diamond: 1999: 186). The following unitisation of Access modules enabled providers to select 'off-the-peg modules' to students, but also moved Access practitioners away from considering flexible programmes responsive to local needs (*ibid.*). Such changes have resulted in the regulation and control over Access provision, culminating in the QAA being appointed to oversee it. Many access educators have perceived this as cause for celebration, quite understandably, after years of struggling at the margins. However, the emphasis on standards and standardisation within the mainstream discourse of widening participation has also constrained innovative approaches to pedagogy and curriculum development, with a focus instead on frameworks and structures.

Standardising Assessment

In a recent OCN conference (NELAF OCN, 20 May 1999) I attended about the future of Access, standards were the theme of the day. One of the workshops focused exclusively on standardisation of assessment. A consensus was quickly established, pointing up the value of transparency on the part of teachers setting essay or exam questions. This would demand, it was decided by the group, that teachers clearly set out the aims and objectives of the assessment exercise, drawn from the criteria set in the validation document, in checksheet form, a method already largely adopted within further education qualification courses such as National Vocational Qualifications and City and Guilds. The student has a list of points s/he must cover, and the teacher need only tick off the boxes to assess the student. If all boxes are ticked, the student has passed and 'proven' their competency at a particular level.

When a delegate pointed out how very prescriptive and constraining this approach might be, the workshop group ignored and detracted from her point, pulling the discussion back to the value of transparency. There appeared to be a collective refusal to engage in a reflexive discussion about 'transparency' and the use of assessment checksheets and to address the complexities of the issues involved. 'Transparency', initially an oppositional term, previously represented a political commitment to challenge the elitist mysticism surrounding academia that served to re-privilege particular groups with the cultural capital to decode deliberately obscure language. The term has now been appropriated to support the New Right and Third Way move towards standardisation, which operates to incapacitate innovative pedagogical praxis that is reflexively responsive to heterogeneity, difference and diversity.

The appropriation of the term 'transparency', embedded in a world view of universality and a technology of normalisation, conceals that all texts are socially constructed and are read by different subjects in different ways according to their positionality in relation to the text. Just as Usher claims that '[r]esearchers are never fully the 'authors' of their texts', (1997: 26) neither are a group of educationalists preparing a validation document fully the 'authors' of their texts. If 'different languages, different registers of the same language, different discourses each construct the world differently; in effect, different worlds are 'known' or 'language' into being' (Usher, 1997: 29) then what happens when a panel of educators 'language' a different world to the world 'language' by the student? A student/participant was clearly aware of such complexities when we were discussing, in the Research Methods class, an interview schedule for my PhD research:

Helen made a very perceptive point about setting questions in the interview. She said the interviews would not necessarily produce 'relevant' answers for my research because participants might answer questions in a totally different way to

what I had expected and interpret what I say differently from what I thought I meant (Research diary, 23 February, 1999).

Obviously Helen was talking about a separate issue; interview questions in a research project. However, the insight she provides here can be easily transposed to the issue of presenting students with an assessment checklist. The checklist may appear to be 'transparent' to the teacher who has written it; however her/his meanings may be mis/interpreted by the students reading it. This throws the notion of transparency into question, although it also means that there are always gaps in the discourse for subversive mis/readings of the authoritative texts guiding pedagogical practices.

Bronwell Maxwell, tracing OCN (Open College Network) development, outlines two main areas of change that has significantly influenced it. The first area of change is the exponential growth in the number of OCN recognised courses and the number of students gaining OCN credits. The second is the heavy usage of the OCN by the FE sector to gain unit recognition and accredit mainstream provision (Maxwell, 1996: 111). Maxwell claims such influences have created a situation where:

- The flexibility and responsiveness of OCNs in accrediting adult learners' achievements, particularly in the area of informal and semi-formal learning, will be severely reduced
- Recognition of adults' learning will be dependent on them moving through externally determined, pre-specified 'boxes'. Was it ever the intention to dismantle the long haul from the bottom of the educational 'ladder', only to replace it with a set of boxes?
- The role of adult learners in formulating their own learning programmes will be reduced
- Informal learning will be once again marginalised and undervalued in the education sector
- The aim of widening participation will not be achieved, as the diversity of provision at the first stages of returning to learning is reduced
- Many small community groups will be excluded from gaining accreditation for their learning, and will therefore lose opportunities for progression

- OCNs will be driven not by a mission to meet the needs of adult learners, but by institutional and organisational aims (Maxwell, 1996: 112).

Maxwell provides a map of OCN development which reveals a cultural shift from addressing the diversity of student needs within access education to a universal top-down model and reinforces John Diamond's observations outlined above (1999). I think the workshop I attended at the OCN conference was representative of such cultural shifts. Maxwell articulates the problem well:

What is deeply worrying about the changing approach to quality assurance is that it represents a radical shift from a credit system designed around meeting the actual needs and situations of adult learners, to awarding credits only if the needs and situations of adult learners are compatible with the accreditation system (*ibid.*).

The emphasis on assessment standardisation and quality assurance detracts from pedagogical concerns, renewing assumptions about how (and if) formal assessment should be carried out. Mainstream approaches to assessment reinstate dominant 'regimes of truth' and particular classroom cultures premised on ablist, racist, (hetero)sexist and classist formations. The assessment criteria reinforce culture-specific ways of writing, arguing and thinking and position answers outside of the dominant academic discourse as invalid. My account of a discussion between Research Methods students illustrates this well:

Helen explained how frustrated she felt about the Access course at the moment. Not the teachers, but the whole structure of the course. Particularly the ways she was forced to write. And when she didn't do as well as she hoped on assessed work, this reinforced her lack of self-confidence and negative self-perceptions. The whole class agreed with everything she said. Peter said it was an absolute struggle to write in the expected way, and that it felt almost impossible. Helen said there was one particular class, that frustrated her most, because, although they had discussions, the questions were pre-set in a way that heavily restricted and

anticipated their responses. Their responses seemed to be pre-determined (Research diary, 9 March 1999).

In Helen's re/presentation of the Access class, although the teacher attempts to have an 'open discussion', this is undermined by the assessment criteria, which determines the way the teacher frames the discussion, and therefore constructs students' responses in order to produce the 'correct' answers. In such classroom contexts, student challenges to hegemonic discourses and ways of understanding the world seem highly unlikely if not impossible. Although the teacher desires a generative open discussion with students, the regulative, pre-set criteria and the dominant discursive practices within the College have undermined her attempts. She is constrained by the available and acceptable meanings around being a teacher, and similarly, students are restricted by the dominant meanings around 'studying'. The narrow focus on standards and quality assurance appears to lead to the reproduction of dominant discourses and the marginalisation of oppositional discourses.

Johnson-Riordan (1997) usefully develops the concept of a 'colonising discourse', which operates as an exclusionary strategy to further alienate subjects who already occupy marginalised positions; for example, working-class women and ethnic minority groups (Johnson-Riordan, 1997). The concept of the 'colonising discourse' might represent the processes described by Helen, which ultimately lead to the marginalisation of students' contributions to theory de/re/construction and epistemological debates.

Johnson-Riordan also introduces the idea of 'de-colonising' education, with a focus on the discipline of Sociology and the authoritarian nature of its texts and discourses. Johnson-Riordan calls for the rewriting of narratives, categories and frameworks of mainstream sociology. I agree and believe these kinds of pedagogical questions must extend to access education generally (which usually includes Sociology on the curriculum). She also proposes, as part of her strategy, an exploration of useful 'border crossings' between disciplinary boundaries, a

particularly helpful insight for the Access to Higher Education course that offers a variety of subject areas, but often does not enable students make interconnections between and through subject divisions. In my work as an access teacher, external moderator and researcher students have often commented to me that moving across and between disciplines helps their understanding and engagement in their learning, while approaches to disciplines as separate areas has been detrimental to their grasping and engaging with abstract ideas. I will return to this issue, drawing on a recorded group discussion with Access students.

Johnson-Riordan asks us to rework the separate spheres of teaching and research, an idea central to this thesis. If we can start to think about the work we do in the classroom as research as well as teaching, we might be more reflexive in our practice, and better able to deal with contextual issues and engage in a politics of difference. She also challenges us to move beyond method, and I believe we can best do this again by thinking about the connections between teaching and research. This way, we do not impose on ourselves prescribed ways of teaching, but we and our students research ourselves and classroom dynamics to continually develop and (re)construct pedagogical approaches responsive to context. As Richard Johnson (1997: 45) argues, 'we must contrive and must sustain critical self-reflexive dialogues about educational aims and practices', including exchanges between teachers and dialogue with students. It is necessary to remember to explicitly discuss how, why and what we teach (*ibid.*: 55) and how this relates to wider social structures, formations of oppression, hegemonic discourses and unequal power relations. It is also necessary to make connections between these wider contexts and the micro-contexts in which our classrooms are located.

Auto/biography as a Pedagogical Tool

Auto/biography provides a resource for exploring the interconnections between social structures, power relations, discursive practices and the private world of knowing and meaning. The slashed spelling of auto/biography emphasises the

relation between the stories of others with the story of self (Birch, 1998: 175). It provides a tool to examine 'the social within each individual' and the ways that 'knowledge structures [are] retold in the individual's own life stories' (*ibid.*). Auto/biography, as a tool of 'cultural critique' (Miller cited in Johnson-Riordan, 1997:125) is a useful pedagogical strategy in the project to

engage in reclaiming culture, difference, subjectivities, borders and memories against the colonising discourse which poses itself as universal and ignores difference (*ibid.*).

However, as I have already argued, traditional academic disciplines forbid the use of the personal, as it does not fit into the rational model of thought demanded in the academic world, which excludes and rejects the body, subjectivities and experiences as sites of knowledge. Yet, finding spaces for exploration of the personal, auto/biographical and the subjective is imperative to collective and individual de/construction of dominant discourses and how they shape our knowledge(s) and understanding(s) of the social world and our positions within it.

Auto/biography may open the space for counter-hegemonic discourse, generating alternative readings, to recreate new meanings and narratives against the grain of common sense and mainstream knowledge (Johnson-Riordan, 1997:125). Through the sharing of personal stories, as well as an engagement with texts through reading and discussing, theory may be re/constructed collaboratively within the classroom by teachers and students.

In a group interview, Women's Studies students discuss the importance of the personal in their learning about themselves and their connection to the world of ideas:

Shelley: Well, I found [Women's Studies] more stimulating and more enjoyable umm, just by, by learning from other people, the other pupils have been able to contribute themselves.

PB: Mmm...so you found it, you found it, umm, rewarding to actually share ideas.

Shelly: Yeah, yeah and to be allowed to share ideas and – and have them respected.

Kate: It comes from the heart ...it helps you to read life.

(Women's Studies group interview, 1999)

Similar themes emerge from our Women's Group discussion:

Lynsey: I do feel stronger since Women's Studies.

PB: In what ways?

Lynsey: Confidence and everything. Like doing that other course... [the tutor] said, "well out of all the class, you've written the most". And I said "well aren't you supposed to do that - to think for yourself". Because they put the answers at the back of the book. So you're not thinking. So I'm looking at the answers to get ideas, but trying to put in my own answers as well.

Kate: I found that difficult. Because my answers were really coming from here [she points to her heart], but when I looked at the answers it was coming from logic and it wasn't about logic it was about feelings.

(Women's Group discussion, December 1999)

Later in the same discussion, Lynsey describes how her approach to learning, through the personal in combination with reading literature, was undermined by her teacher:

Lynsey: Like I was doing the project on culture, and [the tutor] looked at me so odd when I said I'm doing this research. My husband said "there's a lady there from Mauritius", and I said "well I'll go and interview her and talk to her about her culture"...and [the tutor] is looking at me like I'm mad! So I said that's what you're supposed to do, you've got to go out and - so I went down there got all the research and to me that's part of learning about someone's culture. I think [the tutor] finds it strange that I'm going out and putting all this effort into it.

PB: But that's what we did on Women's Studies, talked to other women about their experiences to make sense and challenge theory.

Lynsey: But when I was a doing that one on Mauritius, [the tutor] said "well you can do it out of the book on the Irish culture". And I thought how can I read and pick out what I want when I don't know what I'm on about and you can't beat first-hand experience anyway. Reading a book's not the same as someone actually living there. I mean she's told me things I probably could never read or see on the television anyway.

The theme of the importance of the personal for developing critical thinking and challenges to popular and dominant discourses reoccurs throughout my research diary. For example:

Today the subject focus was on 'the family and mothering', but we tended to keep moving into broader political areas as well as personal examples of the relevant issues. The class discussed the importance of moving freely in and out of the formal course agenda and how inter-connected the personal was to the theoretical as well as the political. Students commented that the 'free' discussion was much richer than the tight boundaries of 'legitimate knowledge'. Kate said 'everything becomes clear to me when I'm at college on Friday mornings' and stressed her increasing feelings of validation in terms of her own emotions and experiences (Research diary, 6 May 1999).

However, the auto/biography, and the use of the personal in the classroom, is not to confuse education with individual therapy or a confessional discourse. Rather, it is to be used as an important tool alongside critical thought, theory, reading and deconstruction of texts, to contribute to the production of meaning, to deconstruct dominant discourses which claim to be universal and 'correct' and to reflexively work towards a 'liberation of the mind' (Professor Gloria Wade-Gayles, Emory University quoted in Maher and Tetreault, 1994: 175). However, the aim is not to build new regimes of truths, which will only serve to disempower 'other others'. This is why the continual connection making between theory, subjectivity and lived experience, and issues of power, contextuality, spatiality, and the (re)construction of meaning are so vital.

There are no simple 'how to' recipes for feminist pedagogy. There are, however, approaches that might help to facilitate collaborative learning and theory deconstruction and refashioning, for example interactive teaching/learning.

The Interactive Classroom

The interactive classroom rejects the traditional model of the teacher as expert and keeper of all truth. Rather, it situates the student as a source of knowledge alongside the teacher, and places collaborative learning at the centre of the educational project. Pedagogical approaches in the interactive classroom might include small group discussions, class brainstorms, autobiographical and journal writing, the sharing of personal stories, text based workshops, pair discussions, small talks and collaborative evaluations. The interactive classroom is premised on a rejection of the lecture as the main source of knowledge and repudiates the idea that there is only one way of correctly answering a question (Epstein, 1997: 182). Interactive pedagogy reduces 'the distance between the expertise of the lecturer and the apprenticeship of the student' (*ibid.*). Such pedagogy attempts to validate students' knowledge while making the teachers' knowledge provisional (*ibid.*).

Greg: People can say what they want to say and you should listen to that because you can learn from anyone. You don't just learn from the teacher; you can learn from someone that you haven't heard speak before.

PB: That's right...

Greg: They can say something you just haven't thought about and go, oh gawd yeah, that's so right!

(Return to Study group discussion, 1999)

Indeed, all participants expressed the benefit of learning from other students as a central part of their access education:

PB: Do you think having life experiences helped your leaning at all?

Hilda: I think so, I think it has. Umm, and I think for me personally, because of what I'd been through with my husband and the people I'd seen through the illness, I'd begun to realise that there are lots of people who aren't as fortunate as I am and I think that continued at college, and I had to try very hard to be understanding and patient. 'Cause I'm very quick to think everybody should understand more and be capable and I think it was umm, quite interesting for me to have to think about these other people and how different they were and their different backgrounds. Which I don't think you'd be capable of as a younger person without experience...

PB: So it made you realise that people were at different points and they've all had different backgrounds...

Hilda: ..and different levels, but they are all still valid.

PB: Did you learn from those people?

Hilda: Definitely! Definitely. That's quite huge really.

(Hilda, Access to HE student, 1999)

Hilda is able to draw on both her own and other students' personal experiences to challenge the dominant discourses that invalidate working-class ideas. She recognises this as a major resource for learning, which took place through interactive pedagogical approaches.

However, the interactive approach is not without its problems. Bringing personal experiences and painful issues into the classroom is risky and has the potential to re-assert power in new and dangerous ways. Revealing painful experiences and more vulnerable aspects of one's identity often increases feelings of powerlessness and inferiority. This is why reflexivity in critical pedagogy is so crucial a tool for addressing the complexity of localised power relationships. Researching with the students I was teaching provided space for such reflexive processes. Nevertheless, this did not ensure that problems were simply solved; rather it opened up some awareness to the complexity of power. In the following extract I am speaking with a student/participant about his experiences of the Research Methods class I taught for only one term on Access. Interestingly my request to extend the course another term was denied, and later I discovered that the course organiser denied my request on the grounds that the course was 'too radical and subversive'. In her words I 'got the students thinking too much'.

John: I –you could see people evolving within themselves and coming to their own conclusions through their interaction with other people, you know, things like that, so it was very beneficial I would say.

PB: I was aware that there were some students who weren't participating as actively and that concerned me a lot. Umm, I mean, were you aware of that?

John: I was aware of that, I was very aware of that and...I mean I was eager, you know, I'd found something at last. But I'd become sensitive to that fact and uh I do believe in time those students, given time they would have been able to express themselves you know. Because in a situation like that, when they see other people being open, and being honest and as truthful as they can be, I'm sure that would have, you know, rubbed off on them and they would have seen it as an opportunity for them to then express themselves. Because I think the process that we started, I think a few students took it as a, you know, they took it as an opportunity to sort of offload all their frustrations, first of all. Which was the beginning part of a process that would have then led them to something else. And that's the sad thing about it—we didn't actually get that far. I mean we were talking about sensitive issues and you know...

PB: It's trust isn't it?

John: Yeah, absolutely!

Interactive learning demands that teachers and students are aware and address that story telling, the sharing of personal stories, can be empowering pathways to resistance and theory (re)construction, but can also be risky. The disclosure of personal experiences may leave students and teachers feeling vulnerable. An understanding that stories can be risky helps participants to explore power relationships within and without the classroom. Furthermore, it is important to address that stories change over time, even as they may become fixed stories that we tell ourselves and others about who we think we are, and again, are not objective truths but subjective constructions. This provides an insight into the construction of subjectivity/ies and the ways they are classed, gendered, raced and sexualised. It also points to the ways that our subjectivities are constituted through shifting and

contradictory discourses. Such pedagogical practices 'assert students' multiplicity of voices, but also deconstruct them, see how they have become what they are, challenge problematic sexist and racist assumptions within them, and reconstruct them' (Hernández, 1997: 20).

Border Crossings in the Access classroom

Key to the interactive classroom is the identifying of interconnections between autobiography, experience, theories, concepts and narrative. In this final section I draw on a recorded group discussion held between three Access to Higher Education students and myself. All three participants were students in the Research Methods class I taught on the programme. In this particular section of the discussion, we are exploring the importance of making interconnections in the classroom. The students led the discussion into a reflection of another class held earlier that day where they were asked to think about sexism.

Leslie: Like today...what were we doing today...we were doing sexism...but I found the lesson quite unstimulating – I found myself rebelling and when they were discussing about women and what they dressed like and should women, like, wear short skirts and we were just talking about fashion, weren't we. And how, you know, if women conform to that and I was like you know (laugh) this is a load of bollocks...people wear what they want to. Do you know what I mean? What does it matter if women want to wear feminine things. And I just couldn't get past all that, you know...

John: Yeah, it's just that the context of the debate was completely wrong. It was just left on a surface level at it were. It was just like, banter, really, you know? So that's why you didn't get hooked.

PB: Yes. Its like this is [sexism] over here, but it bears no relationship to my life as a woman, its just something I've got to know. And that's not exciting is it?

Leslie: I find it really boring. I found it really hard and I wasn't taking up anything today...because like you said, of course I'm interested in women's issues, but today I just couldn't be bothered with anything 'cause it's all like superficial stuff.

PB: What is lacking is the way in which you can make sense of how that has helped you to shape your identity as a woman...

Leslie: Yeah, yeah that's right.

Leslie claims they were 'doing' sexism. The verb 'doing' signifies an assumption, held both by teacher and students, that concepts and theories such as 'sexism' are blocks of knowledge that can be 'done'. That is, students passively assimilate the teacher's lecture/explanation, memorise it, and then demonstrate this knowledge through the assessment process. It is an example of what Freire described as 'banking education'. However, the students here have an understanding that this is 'superficial' learning; they are not being encouraged to engage actively or critically with the concept 'sexism' and have a sense that they are not benefiting intellectually or personally from this classroom experience. There is an implicit awareness that this kind of learning is not transformative.

The students continued their discussion of how the lesson failed to make vital connections, between their experiences, their gendered identities and the active construction of theory and meaning.

Leslie: I think that what pissed me off really was...when she was listing things on the board about women's role, I was like, do we not all know this? I felt it was like ...of course we know what identifies a woman's role. Of course we know things like that! Do you know what I mean? There isn't a person in the class who couldn't tell you what gender roles mean, surely. Surely! But what's important isn't the gender roles, its why they're there in the first place.

Helen: I've probably come up against sexist remarks in the past. If we talked about that...

PB: Its also that if you made links between women's lives in the 50's and 60's and their struggle and how that actually affected your lives today...

Helen: But like how we've just talked about sexism, if we had done that, we should, we should have been able to do that earlier on today. We would have got a lot more out of it. Nothing against the teacher. It's just that if we were allowed to bring up our own ideas, and relate it to something then I'd understand it. Go away and do something with it. Or not. But now, you just can't.

Leslie identifies the reason that their previous class discussion felt superficial; they never reached the heart of the issue. *'But what's important isn't the gender roles, its why they're there in the first place.'* Under the heading 'gender roles', the class brainstormed women's expected social roles, without an exploration of why this list was significant to their own gendered identities and the maintenance of social inequalities. The list was meaningless to the class. Moreover, the pedagogical approach was patronising to a group of adults who had lived experiences of gender. The teacher failed to draw on the knowledge of the students to consider, deconstruct and reconstruct analyses and theories about the significance of sexism for both individual students and for the resistance and rejection of gender constructions that serve as mechanisms of oppression(s).

Pedagogy Matters

I have highlighted in this chapter the ways in which my dual position as teacher/researcher enabled co-participants of the research to collaboratively examine pedagogical issues in relation to their own experiences of classroom practices. The

collaborative approach to the research highlighted compelling connections between methodology, epistemology, pedagogy and practice.

A central concern of the chapter has been to revitalise discussions about the relationship between pedagogy and widening access with a focus on the diverse insights and experiences of access students. Feminist post/structural theory engages a politics of difference and points to the complexity of pedagogical relations, processes and practices. Pointing to the absence of pedagogy within central policy development, I have examined the implications of a commitment to widening participation driven by concerns to modernise the welfare state, intrinsically linking welfare to 'education' as a bridge to work. The strategies evolving from this position have increasingly been tied to market principles, conceptualising individuals as consumers of education or employees of the labour market. The emphasis, therefore, has been a competitive one, in terms of national, individual and educational competitiveness. Education, consequently, has undergone a significant transformation, particularly in the further and adult education sector, leading to training programmes and utilitarian kinds of competence-based learning. This, together with the expansion of further and adult education, including Access courses, has led to a focus on standards and standardisation of assessment, leaving little space for pedagogical considerations.

There is a tension, then, between national policy and the radical strand of access ideology, which has origins in a transformatory project that sought to reveal and disrupt institutionalised classism, sexism and racism. Since its beginnings in the early 1980's, access programmes have struggled for mainstream recognition and status within the further and higher educational sectors. The New Labour Government, appointing the QAA as the overseeing agency for Access to Higher Education, and placing educational access as a political priority, has finally recognised such efforts. This has led Access organisers, validation agencies and practitioners to experience a sense of relief after years of struggle, and to conform to the demands of those in decision-making positions. Standards, therefore, have

become the focus of both the macro and micro discourse of access, to the detriment of transformatory pedagogical developments. It is my argument that pedagogy is crucial to the access education project, and that collaborative discussions are needed towards examining and practising pedagogy that remains committed to anticlassism, antiracism and anti(hetero)sexism, while maintaining a politics of difference.

In this chapter, my gaze has been on the dominant discourses in tension with access education, dis/placing pedagogy as a central concern of widening participation and mis/shaping the opportunities for access students to engage with and contribute to the reconstruction of theory and discourse. In the following chapter, my attention turns to a major theme emerging from participants' narratives about feelings of intimidation and inferiority in connection with their experiences of access education. I explore such feelings within the context of a British history and cultural common sense in which working-class women have been constructed as pathological. I locate the access project within an institution founded on classist, racist and sexist traditions and examine the concept of 'mass education' from various discourse positions that construct 'non-standard' students as illegitimate and inferior. I also draw attention to pedagogical practices that reinforce such negative constructions of 'non-standard' students. The aim of the chapter is to reveal the ways that students are re/positioned by hegemonic discourses and the attempts of students and tutors to resist such discursive practices, creating oppositional spaces.

Notes for Chapter Four

¹ Although, 'lecturer' is the title generally used in both further and higher education, I use the title 'teacher' throughout this chapter to emphasise the role of teaching and pedagogy in the access classroom (Epstein, 1997).

² The concept of 'needs' relating to specific social groups, e.g. mature women students, is problematic because it re-confirms differences based on essentialist meanings associated with 'being a woman'. Riley argues that while struggling for the 'needs' of women is important, we must do this 'by keeping it clear that these demands represent only current and not universal needs of women' (Riley, 1983: 194-195 cited in Alcoff, 1988: 428).

Chapter Five: Intimidating/ory Education

I felt really nervous and sick and when I walked into the college the first time I thought what am I doing here? (Linda, recorded conversation, 1999)

Coming back to college was nerve wracking! (Louise, recorded conversation, 1999)

Introduction

This chapter focuses on a major theme that emerged in participants' narratives about feelings of intimidation and inferiority in connection with their educational experiences. I explore such feelings within a historical and social context in an attempt to expose the shifting subject positions available to access students. I locate the access project within an institution founded on classist, racist and sexist traditions and examine the contemporary concept of 'mass education' from various discourse positions that place access students as 'illegitimate' and 'inferior'. The aim of the chapter is to reveal access education as a site of struggle, the ways that students are re/positioned by hegemonic discourses and the attempts of students and tutors to resist such discursive practices, creating oppositional spaces.

Intimidation is a big thing!

There's a fear of being in the classroom. Intimidation; that's a big thing (Kerry, recorded conversation, 1999)

Access education seeks to target those social groups who have historically been excluded from education. This is problematic for access students entering an arena that is generally seen as the property of the middle classes. Educational space is historically androcentric and eurocentric; a colonialist and patriarchal domain heavily regulated through class privilege, which is one of the key reasons the groups targeted by access education have been educationally

excluded in the first place (Morley, 1999: 87; Bird, 1998; Fieldhouse, 1996:2; Evans, 1995; Purvis, 1991: 117 - 118; Acker and Piper, 1990). Although one of the main aims of access education is to challenge such privilege and exclusion, there remains the problem that the access project is located within an institution founded on classist, sexist and racist traditions.

However, the academic world has changed significantly over the past century and is continuing to rapidly change in response to a new age of profound unease and uncertainty, globalisation and information technology. As I have argued in other chapters, widening educational participation has become a project embraced in the mainstream and by the State, driven by particular motives, for example raising national economic competitiveness, although such motives are in tension with the radical ideas of the Access movement (see Chapters Two and Four). Through the strategies of the New Right, and the embracing of neo-liberal ideas by New Labour, education could be described as a quasi-market, and consequently the educational world can no longer be *simplistically* described as patriarchal or elitist (although new and more complex power relations have developed as a consequence). For instance, the individual 'consumer' is not discriminated against on the basis of gender, because in the quasi-market of education, women may constitute an attractive (profitable) market to target for 'inclusion'. Yet, as Mary Evans argues 'universities can recognise a lucrative, gendered market but then ignore the particular gendered needs of that group' (1995: 74). The university in particular remains an arena where class privilege is maintained and women's participation appears to be limited to the bottom end of a hierarchical continuum, for example as students and junior level staff (Morley, 1999: 178; Gardiner and O'Rourke, 1998: 133-134; Evans, 1995: 73; Davies and Hollyway, 1995: 12; Bagilhole, 1994: 15; Fryer, 1990: 280).

The Industrialisation of Education

As well as the marketisation of education, a key change, which must be addressed to understand the context in which access education is situated and has developed, is the move into a mass system and away from an elite system. Indeed without the ideological and policy shifts from an elite to a mass system,

the formal Access (with a big A) to Higher Education programme may never have achieved the mapping out of its own distinct space within the educational world. Mass higher education is often assumed to mean that all sections of the population are now equally represented in higher education. However, much statistical evidence reveals that, as we enter the new millennium, this is not a true picture (NOCN annual report, 1997-8; Leonard, 1994: 164; Egerton and Halsey, 1993: 189). It has been argued that mass education simply means that more middle class women are now participating in higher education (Evans, 1995: 74) and Table 1 below would certainly support such an argument.

Social class		Male %	Female %
Accepted Access Applicants	I Professional	2.42	1.53
	II Intermediate	20.68	23.76
	IIIM Skilled Manual	20.03	8.82
	IIIN Skilled Non-manual	13.34	23.01
	IV Partly Skilled	13.34	12.19
	V Unskilled	4.11	1.48
	X Unknown	26.09	29.21
Other Accepted Applicants	I Professional	13.8	13.0
	II Intermediate	38.5	40.3
	IIIM Skilled Manual	15.1	14.8
	IIIN Skilled Non-manual	11.1	12.1
	IV Partly Skilled	7.3	7.5
	V Unskilled	1.9	1.6
	X Unknown	12.3	10.7

Figure 5.A: Accepted Applicants to Higher Education in 1998.
Information from Peters, 1999 report for UCAS

Furthermore, although women's access to education has opened up to some extent (keeping in mind that class, dis/ability and ethnicity come into play here), little has changed in terms of curriculum content and organisation (*ibid.*; Shuster, 1994: 197). As Morley comments, 'the demographic composition of the academy is changing, while organisational cultures seem to be lagging behind' (1999: 87). The academy, in an attempt to protect its position of authority, has legitimated culturally specific ways of studying the world, which privilege white, masculinist and neo-colonial methodologies, epistemologies and ontologies, while claiming these as objective and value-free. Importantly, critical, feminist and radical scholarship *has* inspired and created change within higher education, and there are mainstream concerns for inclusiveness and equal opportunities. Yet the new dominant discourses of the academy are deeply entwined with the

hegemony of neo-liberalism, rooted in consumerism, vocationalism, marketisation, individualism and competitiveness. The dominance of neo-liberal and neo-colonial discourses within a mass education system serves to reposition 'non-traditional' students as 'other' and has contributed to the opening of a 'mental space in which people dream and act is largely occupied by Western imagery' (Sachs 1992: 4 cited in Ryan, 2000: 46). Ryan argues that

Within the higher education sector to date there is evidence of a marked preference for maintaining the existing educational delivery system and little evidence of a willingness to critique the knowledge base that informs this system. Participation in the system is conditional on conformity to predetermined truths and dissention is suppressed (Ryan, 2000: 51).

Others warn that the mass education system has created the 'industrialisation of education', revealing some of the contradictions posed by a focus on mass recruitment and expansion:

Indeed for others, democratic participation in higher education is a contradiction in terms. Universities cannot function effectively as centres of intellectual production if they are overrun by students. Some colleagues draw parallels with the effects of mass tourism on National Parks and similar amenities. For them, increased student numbers and the pursuit of diverse income sources are leading to the *industrialisation of education*, where the mass production of graduates and credentials is replacing the carefully hand-crafted scholar of a former era (HEQC, 1994: 329 quoted in Morley, 1999: 142).

Mass education has been problematised due to the 'very pressure of numbers resulting from the market success of attracting and accepting' students who have not reached higher education through conventional courses (Epstein, 1995: 61). Epstein asks:

To what extent can the extension of access to Higher Education be said to have improved equal opportunities if many of the students entering HE for the first time lack the tools which will enable them to succeed in gaining degrees and are not enabled to gain those tools? (*ibid.*)

With the increasing pressure on (mostly female) tutors to provide pastoral care, teach, carry out administrative responsibilities and cope with large student numbers, often on a part-time contract, the feminist commitment to challenging

institutional inequalities may sometimes feel like an impossible goal (Morley, 1999: 143; Epstein, 1995; Skeggs, 1995a). I have found, during informal chats with students, that they are all too aware of the hardships tutors face in juggling their many responsibilities and commitments, generating feelings of sympathy from students despite the personal disappointment that their needs are just not being met as a consequence. These are some of the contradictions posed by the mass system, the market-led approach and the structure and organisation of education which in many ways still fails to provide programmes that accommodate and respond to the cohorts of students recruited through the policy of widening educational participation.

Class, Gender and the Discourses of Mass Education

There are competing ways of understanding the mass system, which I would argue have become embedded in popular common senses. Examining these positions provides a framework for understanding some of the subject positions access students take up, which I will consider in detail later in this chapter.

Mass education has been interpreted from a variety of discourse positions, discussed by Williams (1997a) who draws on categories of discourse positions developed by Ball (1990). For example, the 'academic traditionalists', a category attached to elite descendants of the nineteenth century humanists and neo-conservatives, regard the mass system as undermining the tried and tested elite system of provision. Through this discourse position, a moral panic around standards has been generated (Williams, 1997a: 31). 'The notion of 'mass' within this position resonates with labels of 'cheap and nasty', with a cultural discourse within which 'the masses' is a term of denigration and mass production cannot be quality production' (*ibid.*: 32). Through such a discourse elite becomes equated with 'quality' and mass with 'second-class'. Alternatively, the 'marketeers', those who advocate a market-led approach to education, would argue that 'a mass market provides for entrepreneurial potential and a cheaper product but an elite sector can and should remain as differentiated consumers demand a differentiated product' (*ibid.*: 35). This position therefore justifies that more prestigious institutions 'remain the cultural possession of the traditionally

advantaged' (Williams, 1997b:158). Williams argues that these more prestigious institutions are in a position to draw on the discourse of academic excellence in order to protect their interests in maintaining an elitist system (*ibid.*).

The notion of mass education therefore is contested, and precisely whom it benefits is also debatable. For example, Woodrow (1996: 6) argues:

A mass system of higher education is not for the masses. In a period when recession and regressive economic policies have widened the gap between the rich and poor, we have not succeeded in tackling under representation caused by socio-economic status. The virtual extinction of discretionary awards, changes in social security, the sharp decline in the real value of grants, and the unresolved shambles of student loan schemes have increasingly shifted responsibility for funding on to students and their families. This has resulted in a system of access by ability to pay (cited in Williams, 1997b: 160).

Non-Standard Students

Furthermore, 'A' levels are still generally regarded as the gold standard to university entry, 'the normal method of entry, the signifier of both individual and institutional worth, the predictor of quality output' (*ibid.*: 160; see also Thompson, 1997: 114; Leonard, 1994: 174). It is against these standards that the access student is still judged as less worthy. Terms such as 'non-traditional' or 'non-standard' carry with them fixed meanings relating to age, class, ethnicity, gender and 'race' (Williams, 1997b; see also Chapter Six). Access students are automatically categorised as 'non-standard' students because they have not taken the traditional route through education of an 'A' level at age 18 (Webb, 1997: 68).

The majority of students participating in my research project clearly perceive educational space as somewhere that they do not belong, particularly in their first year or two of educational participation. Participants identified with the 'non-standard' category, particularly because of their age and social class background, positioning them as 'illegitimate students'. Working-class identities rendered participants as outsiders in the academic realm of the classroom, while

lecturers and traditional students are regarded as the 'other'; the worthy and the ones who have 'real' knowledge and experience.

Like I said before, about being at school, I think you get this impression of the teacher being better than you (Linda, recorded conversation, 1999).

A theme emerging from many participants' accounts was that to be working-classed means to be practical but not intellectual, and to never 'get it right':

Categories of class operate not only as an organising principle which enable access to and limitations on social movement and interaction but are also reproduced at the intimate level as a 'structure of feeling' in which doubt, anxiety and fear inform the production of subjectivity. To be working-classed, Kuhn (1995) argues, generates a constant fear of never having 'got it right' (Skeggs, 1997: 6).

And as Kerry writes in her research diary:

First day back after the summer holidays. What a shock!! I didn't expect Sociology to get so heavy so quickly. The teacher seems like an approachable guy thank god, because I will probably be going to him for lots of help.
Question: Why do I always feel that I am not good enough to do the work?
Answer: I don't know. I must look into it (Kerry, 1999, emphasis added).

Such feelings of inferiority need to be understood within the context of a British history and cultural common sense in which working-class groups, and particularly working class women, have been constructed as potentially polluting and pathological. This history has its roots in nineteenth century bourgeois thinking, and continues to exist today when single mothers are blamed for a variety of social problems and mothers in general (particularly working-class ones) are seen as failing to equip their children with the 'right' skills, attitudes and values to fit the demands of 'the nation'. Such ideas impact students' identities and the ways they understand themselves as (not) learners, as well as the way they make sense of what they are learning.

As Stanley articulates so clearly:

The knowledge/power structures that impact at an individual level are the product of social and economic systems that have for centuries excluded people of my gender, my class and those marginalized by 'race', age and bodily disabilities. Language is used to signify and reinforce class oppression; formal education institutions are just examples of the places where systematic shaming and undermining, posited on notions of superiority and inferiority, are reinforced. That eroding phrase 'working-class thicken' no longer even needs to be spoken, so well is it internalized. It is a conditioned response, quite fixed before adolescence (transmitted through advertising and media as well as through school and social interactions), and one which is useful to a society which wants working-class women to take a usefully low and unchallenging position within it (1995: 171).

The concept of the 'hidden curriculum' helps to explain such processes within the realm of educational institutions. The hidden curriculum has been used to explain the implicit process of learning that takes place in schools, whereby children learn from the general ethos or environment of the school (Epstein, 1995: 57). Epstein usefully develops the concept as an active process that must account for wider political, historical and social contexts in order to understand how the tutor and the student make sense of the taught curriculum:

We can think of the curriculum (taught and hidden) as a kind of text (in its extended sense) which students are required to read. In this context we can see that how students 'read' the curriculum (or what they learn) derives from a combination of what lecturers offer (and the way they offer it), the ethos produced by the institutional arrangements of particular classes and of the institution of the whole, and events and common senses from the wider society. In other words, the hidden curriculum can be seen as including the cultural referents available to students and staff alike (*ibid.*: 59).

I will now focus on the history of the construction of social class and gender in order to make sense of the way context, culture, subjectivity and social space combine to form a dynamic hidden curriculum.

Exploring the historical context

In the above section, Kerry clearly expresses a sense of inferiority that she simultaneously is unable to explain. Morley reminds us that:

Anna Freud (1937) suggested that subordinate and oppressed parties tend to introject, or internalise, the negative characteristics that their oppressors have projected on to them. This interpretation acknowledges the extent to which misinformation as a result of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism and disablism has been internalised by subordinated groups (Morley, 1999: 113).

A deconstruction of the historical narratives about working-class women exposes the hegemonic discursive practices that constitute a part of Kerry's subjectivity. It is through the inherited legacy of working-class women's presumed 'unworthiness' that Kerry comes to see herself as 'not good enough to do the work'. A brief outline of the history of the patriarchal discourse of the 'inferior working-class woman' will illuminate the connection between the social construction and the personal expression of (lack of) self-value made by Kerry.

During the nineteenth century transition from an aristocratic, capitalist society to an industrial, capitalist society, the bourgeois domestic ideology became established. Purvis (1987: 253) has highlighted three key assumptions of this ideology: first, that there is a natural division between men and women expressed through the separation of the public and private spheres, second, that women, tied to the home, were not independent individuals but defined in relation to men and children, and finally, that women were naturally inferior to men. Such assumptions were often advocated through biological determinism and through the religious idea of a divine natural order.

Biological differences between the sexes and the supposed inferiority of woman's intellect were used too as arguments to oppose the entry of women into higher education in the 1860's and after (*ibid.*: 254).

Although, middle-class and working-class women were tied by this socially constructed identification with domesticity, and the implications that came with it, the bourgeoisie upheld ideals of femininity that were class-specific; 'they upheld a double standard in that what was considered appropriate, relevant and attainable for middle-class women was inappropriate, irrelevant and unattainable for working-class women' (*ibid.*: 255). The ideal form of femininity, that of the 'perfect wife and mother' involved the display of certain virtues such as self-denial, patience, resignation, to be ladylike, and to manage a household without

involvement in manual labour. The working-class woman could merely aspire to the secondary 'good woman' status, that of the housekeeper, wife and mother. Held responsible for stabilising the feared unstable working-class family, the working-class woman was identified as both the solution to and the cause of numerous social problems (Skeggs, 1997: 76).

The working-class family was used as an explanation (and excuse) for social disharmony and malfunction (*ibid.*). Working-class women were frequently blamed for social problems including alcoholism, crime, the spread of disease and a high infant mortality rate (Purvis, 1987: 256). Those problems associated with industrialisation and urbanisation were projected onto the supposed failure of the working-class woman to fulfil her role as a 'good woman'. These bourgeois judgements and ideals formed part of the context within which educational institutions were founded and reformed – those who formulated policy were mainly from the middle-classes (*ibid.*: 257)

This historical legacy can still be traced within education today, for example expressed through the discourse of selection (Williams, 1997a). As we have seen through the competing explanations of mass education, opening the educational gates to the working classes (particularly those who are women and/or Black) is often regarded as detrimental to the maintenance of high standards and quality:

University proper is for a tiny elite. The expansion of Britain's universities has led (as predicted) to disastrous confusion, disappointment and a collapse of standards. In the name of meritocracy, most universities ought to be closed down, or be converted into genuinely vocational tertiary colleges. (Minette Marrin, 1999, *The Daily Telegraph*)

Through a 'fair' meritocratic system, it is seen as commendable for academic gatekeepers to 'allow' individuals in who can prove their special talent (by default this means those special individuals who do not have birthrights to the middle class privilege of attending university). However, this is seen as a dangerous move when particular social *groups* (rather than talented *individuals* from particular social groups) are being targeted for inclusion which may alter

the fragile 'natural order' and therefore national social stability. Again, the comments made by Minette Marrin encapsulate this position:

It is worth remembering that meritocracy is a dangerous genie to let out of the bottle. Meritocracy is always invoked in the name of fairness, but it isn't the same thing at all. Actually there's nothing unfair in the natural distribution of merit. A real commitment to academic merit in this country would mean stopping the pretence that everyone can aspire to a university education, because it simply is not true; it is a harmful egalitarianism deception (*ibid.*).

Without recognition of how structural and institutional power shapes the selection of who will or will not have access to higher education, Marrin's conclusions serve to re-establish existing hierarchies of power. Her discourse serves to re-authorise the de-legitimisation of particular groups.

Williams argues that students are constructed as normal or abnormal, worthy or unworthy, acceptable or unacceptable through 'polarising discourses' (Williams, 1997a: 25; Ball, 1990). Through the use of key 'icon' words, such as elite, standard and quality, the unacceptability of the opposite is assumed: mass, non-standard, access (Williams, 1997a: 25).

Meanings are constructed through explicit or more often implicit contrast; a positive rests upon the negative of something antithetical. The normal, the worthy student and the acceptable processes of admission are legitimised by references to the abnormal, the unworthy, the unacceptable (*ibid.*: 26).

After briefly considering the history in which the constructs of 'class' and 'gender' have been used discursively to reproduce binary thinking (for example that men are rational and women are emotional, that middle-class culture is superior while working-class culture is deficient), it is not surprising that many participants, most of whom were (self-defined) working-class women, expressed a fear of being seen in the classroom. Radical and feminist pedagogy seeks to 'give voice' to students, yet perhaps this goes against the desires of the student, who work hard to retain a level of invisibility; to remain silent and unnoticed in the classroom. Such student attempts must be linked within the macro historical, political and socio-cultural frameworks that students are located within, as well

as the micro political, socio-cultural context of the access classroom. Students do not want to be recognised as not belonging, as being discovered as not middle-class, and therefore not, the embedded logic follows, intelligent:

If it was someone like that fella who- who was very very intelligent then I'd be more quiet I think, because I wouldn't want him to think I was totally stupid in the questions that I ask. I mean I was listening to you for quite a while before I said anything. So I'd have to be listening for quite awhile before I'd actually say something (Amanda, recorded conversation, 1999).

The first thing I was really frightened of was the speaking out (Linda, recorded conversation, 1999).

Empowering Education?

Access educators have attempted to 'empower' students through the practice of critical, feminist and progressive pedagogy in the access classroom (Anderson and Gardiner, 1998; Webb, 1998; McGivney, 1998; Maher and Tetreault, 1994; Macedo, 1994). Positioned as a political project, feminist and critical pedagogy has been seen as a tool for empowerment, leading to personal and social transformation and challenging the traditional hierarchical relationship between teacher and student (Morley, 1999: 101). Lather adopts the concept of empowerment to mean:

Analysing ideas about the causes of powerlessness, recognising systematic oppressive forces, and acting both individually and collectively to change the conditions of our lives (Lather, 1991: 4).

One of the goals of the empowerment project is to 'give power' to the 'less powerful', implying that tutors have power to distribute more equally to students. Such an idea has been critiqued by feminist theorists drawing on Foucault's thesis that power is not a possession and 'cannot be and is not distributed in the same way as, for example, slices of cake' (Epstein, 1993: 11). However, it remains important to address that 'power can be and is distributed through the

ways in which institutions...are organised and tends to accrue to certain groups of people – most obviously white, middle-class, heterosexual men' (*ibid.*).

The concept of empowerment is highly contested and has been deconstructed by poststructuralist feminist academics (Gore, 1993; Luke and Gore, 1992; Lather, 1991). An important insight of deconstructionist analysis is that critical and feminist pedagogues are implicated in and perpetuate power inequalities, demanding a reflexivity in order to recognise and think through such complicity. For example, the concept of empowerment presupposes an agent of empowerment and places the feminist tutor in the superior position of rescuer and empowerer of 'others' (Morley, 1999: 105). Morley points out that 'this suggests that individuals or groups with more cultural capital, in terms of educational qualifications and professional status, can have power over those denied access to such capital' (*ibid.*: 111). She further comments that:

A postmodern view could articulate how...education is part of this manipulative network of power, in so far as it provides a constant surveillance of the individual and legitimates what counts as cultural capital. Empowerment can imply lack and a deviant passivity which must be worked on through new forms of disciplinary regimes such as watching, listening, knowing (*ibid.*).

Morley problematises the concept of 'empowerment' when it involves the assumption that tutors should or do have power over students, leading to new forms of disciplinary regimes. It is yet another way that those groups historically positioned as inferior may be observed, regulated, categorised and trained by those deemed to 'know better'.

'Student empowerment' has been seen as possible through 'conscientisation' (Friere, 1972), an awareness-raising and reflexive process that leads to a political recognition that students' knowledge, experience and ideas are as valuable, and as real, as the knowledge, experience and ideas of the 'other'; the male, white, middle classes (Skeggs, 1997; Maher and Tetreault, 1994; Evans, 1995). It is the shift in self-perception and subjectivity, which also requires the shift in the way the 'other' is perceived, which is seen as potentially empowering. For example, Kerry explains a shift in thinking from tutors always being right to the idea that

tutors have opinions, which are of equal value to her own ideas and are not objective truths. She speaks about this in the context of a Sociology Access course, where she is arguing with the teacher that instincts and intuition do exist. He tells her that she is wrong:

With this instinct thing, he came back with all these notes and - and I thought oh-oh, I can't do it [small laugh]. And uumm, I thought, well he thinks I'm wrong but these are my opinions, and I was speaking to my friend and she said, well Sociology is about different people's opinions, nobody says you're wrong, nobody says he's right. It's all about how you interpret different things. Just because you believe in things like intuition and he doesn't, doesn't mean that you're wrong. So once I got through that, I was able to say to the tutor, "no, that's your opinion". So that's a step forward for me, whereas before I would have thought that's it, I've finished now, I can't do it (Kerry, recorded conversation, 1999).

The shift in Kerry's thinking certainly represents a significant shift in terms of her subject positioning. However, a problem with the notion of empowerment is that the emphasis is often on individual agency rather than on the struggle to recognise, expose and transform structural power relations. Indeed, the educational project of empowerment itself is limited by the power relations that determine the re/position/ing of the access student in relation to the middle classed lecturer. This means that access education as a project for empowerment and emancipation is always constrained to some extent by wider social and structural relations. The individual access student is similarly constrained by social and discursive structures, which re-position the subject according to age, class, dis/ability, gender and 'race' relations, although such positioning is always fluid through the agency of the subject and through shifting and contradictory discourses. The active subject may refuse or accept the subject positions available, although refusal and acceptance again are limited by structural factors. Education provides a tool for *momentary* refusals and acceptances (Skeggs, 1997), a mechanism by which power relations may be temporarily disrupted or contested and subject position boundaries provisionally remapped and redefined.

PB: What is it you really love about science?

Kerry: Practical, I love doing it. It just stems from like opening presents, when you're a little girl and I used to just rip it up...you're doing something, I love hands on things. Like, I was brought up with my dad mending cars, and I could change a wheel when I was 10. It's hands on, always, you know I would tinker with car engines when I was little and I know how to change brake pads, because its practical. And I'm a practical person. More so, then, uumm, an intellectual person, but I've built up that side of myself, that I can do the practical and the theory, as well as each other.

Kerry accepts the subject position offered to her through the educational system; she is, she implies, inherently practical and not intellectual; those characteristics associated with working-classness. However, she actively re-frames her position by arguing that she is able to 'build up' the other side of herself; the intellectual. It may not be 'natural' to her, but she can 'do' theory, and therefore middle-classness. Furthermore, she makes a link between her practical skill and her ability to understand science, therefore redefining the practical as a necessary and valuable skill in accessing certain forms of (middle class) knowledge. Finally, she challenges gender stereotypes by naturalising the ability of girls to do things like change brake pads and understand and enjoy science. She actively re-maps her social position across the boundaries of gender and class.

However such agency is fragile and too easily undermined in the access classroom. The words of Charity illustrate this point when she describes her frustration that students' contributions may be *listened* to, but not *heard* as serious ideas:

I think if the development of ideas starts to happen there's umm, there's a sense of ideas not being valued for what they are: ideas. There's a sense of; "oh yes, well I see that, but actually this is what's important". So it's almost a sort of umm, you know, there might be some kind of listening, but not actually a developing of [students' ideas] you know? (Charity, recorded conversation, 1999)

The undermining of students, although clearly not an intention of access education policy, also may take place during assessments.

Intimidatory/ing Exams

If I pass my Psychology exam that will be a bonus (Vanessa, recorded conversation, 1999).

I'm quite happy learning, just learning about it and if I do pass then that's a bonus. So that's my perspective on it (Linda, recorded conversation, 1999).

Many of the participants have spoken about exams in a similar way, claiming that they have no expectations about passing exams, but if they do pass that would only be 'a bonus'. Initially, I interpreted this as evidence of their educational participation as purely motivated by the pleasure of the learning process, students placing no significance on qualifications or progression. Upon reflection, it occurred to me that this attitude may also represent a defence mechanism, a way for students to protect themselves from the shame of 'failure', and from the disappointment of being recognised as and allocated the label of 'academically unworthy', an identity that many have carried with them since early schooling. Benn explains:

The different messages carried for males and females by social, political and economic contexts are part of the circumstances in which learning is set and hence are strongly influential on the outcomes. Learner expectations, societal expectations and tutor and institutional behaviour all sit in and are influenced by this context' (Benn, 1998: 112).

The examination system is generally accepted as an objective exercise that reveals the 'true' position of a student against the measurement of excellence and failure and against the other students s/he is competing with. Foucault argues that the examination is an instrument of 'disciplinary power' (Foucault, 1975). Its success derives 'from the use of simple instruments: hierarchical observation,

normalising judgement, and their combination in a procedure that is specific to it – the examination' (Foucault, 1984: 188). The exercise of disciplinary power:

presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible' (*ibid.*: 189).

In the examination, the spatial context is crucial to the operation of this hierarchical observation: 'the spatial "nesting" of hierarchized surveillance' (*ibid.*: 190). This includes the architecture of the educational institution in which the examination is held, the precise measuring of distance between desks students occupy and the invigilator who watches over students as they complete their exams. Through the 'normalising judgement' exercised through the examination process, individuals are given a mark of distinction, differentiated from one another via 'an average to be respected, an optimum toward which one must move' (*ibid.*: 195). The instruments of disciplinary power serve to normalize; to differentiate, hierarchize, homogenize and exclude (*ibid.*). The 'normalizing gaze' of the examination operates as a mechanism of surveillance creating the possibility 'to qualify, classify, and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them' (*ibid.*: 197).

The examination transformed the economy of visibility into the exercise of power. And the examination is the technique by which power, instead of emitting signs of its potency, instead of imposing its mark on its subjects, holds them in a mechanism of objectification. In this space of domination disciplinary power manifests the potency essentially by arranging objects. The examination is, as it were, the ceremony of this objectification (Foucault, 1975: 187).

Through this system judgements are made, both by the lecturer and the student, about who the student is, what s/he is capable of and her/his location in society in relation to other positioned individuals. Such a system introduces the binary opposite of 'good' and 'bad', which places the student on a continuum with the 'best' at one end and the 'worst' at the other (Canaan, 1997: 172). It is a system that access students remember well, one that they understand as objective and

fair, and one that has already shaped their self-perceptions and self-expectations from childhood.

Luckily enough me Mum and Dad never ever were like some parents, 'cause they knew I weren't really academically that bright and at least I didn't have the pressure from them keep pushing me and telling me do this, telling me to do that. I never had any of that, so I was grateful I suppose for that. But then when I went into Secondary School umm yes I was put, yes it was a band system then, and I think that it went A, B and C or it was A and B were the top and I was right at the bottom. You had top middle and bottom and I was always at the bottom anyway. I still didn't really do very good in that at all. Looking back, I don't really think they were that helpful. As I say they just dismissed you as if you were really thick and that's it; they concentrate on the ones that could do it (Amanda Brown, recorded conversation, 1999).

And the 11 plus system was in at the primary school. And I don't remember any discussions or knowledge or anything being taught about the fact that we were going to have this examination. There was no preparation whatsoever. I can remember suddenly getting wind that this was going to happen and then panicking, literally feeling quite panicked about what was going on and what was going to be expected. Anyway, I went ahead and we sat this exam and I don't know who got through and who didn't all I know is that I obviously failed... but it was almost like there was this expectation that certain people wouldn't get through (Charity, recorded conversation, 1999).

Grades are seen as reflections of individual value, and reproduce cultural myths about fairness and meritocracy. They re-confirm the fear that previous educational 'failures' were about intrinsic lack of intelligence and that exam grades will prove the fairness of lack of opportunity, past and future, both academically and occupationally. It is a place that identity through class has the potential to be re-affirmed.

There is a real tension between the ethos of access education, which is politically committed to educational equality, and the assumptions of the examination

system, which serve to reinforce inequalities of worth. Education that attempts to challenge relations of power between teacher and student, places experience as key to the re/construction of knowledge and theory, seeks to raise political consciousness and promote activism is at odds with a system that draws on assumptions around universal measurements of student worth through standardised assessment methods. Not only does the examination serve as a reinforcement of inequalities between those who have the 'right' cultural capital and those who do not, but it is another way that the intentions of the access tutor are undermined by her location in the academy. My colleague explained to me her deep reservations about the use of examinations in access education:

At the end of our respective classes, Christine and I had a chat. She told me how intelligent her students were, but many of them had dyslexia which held them back. She said with the emphasis on examinations they just could not get through, no matter how intelligent they were (Research diary, 15 June, 1999).

I would imagine most access tutors would relate to Canaan's words when she expresses her dread of the marking of exams and essays:

When I grade students' essays, I am most fully enacting my position as power-knowledge broker, locating my students at discrete places along a hierarchically ranked continuum which is thought to indicate their worth as students (Cannan, 1997: 173).

It is significant that the one participant in my research project who has 'chosen' the conventional route of A levels, primarily due to her age (she was 19 when she first applied to the college and the Access programme targets individuals aged 21 and above), speaks in the greatest detail about her fear of exams that has not dissipated through three years of adult educational participation. Her contribution highlights the importance of assessment approaches with regard to students' levels of achievement, their sense of control over their learning process, and the intimidatory way that exams serve to re/position students in terms of their social value, having repercussions in their future decisions, choices and opportunities. Such regulating mechanisms feed back to the ways that individuals perceive themselves and their future prospects:

Sadie: Until I get to the day when I'm sitting there doing the exam I'll be, I'll be worrying about it. But it's only because I'm so terrible at exams that I worry about them. It's just the worry – you can't stop yourself. That's the way you are about exams - you worry about them. You worry about them. You're never right as well. If you could do it, if you weren't stressed about the thought that you've come to the exam – I've got to do my best –

PB: Yeah...do you think exams are unfair?

Sadie: Yeah, I do a bit. I think because there's so much percentage on them, and I think there should be more on how well you've done in the year, how well you've done in coursework. That's really how well you do as a student. I do think they are unfair. Some people just get on with them and don't pain over them, but they do let you down. They do let you down. Which is why I try to do my best in my coursework, try to make up my grade...I know, even if I revised every day from now to my exams, I wouldn't do any better than if I left it to a couple of months before, because I blank anyway when I get in there. It does gradually come back, but then you've run out of time. And your writing's all messy and you've got spelling mistakes and...things like that. It's awful. I hate them. I know you've got to have them, but I don't think they show who you really are. You can end up getting a grade you don't deserve. There'd be a lot more people out there doing well in education and moving on, but they just don't get recognised in exams. And then they feel 'gawd, I must be awful' but they're not really. You just panic too much. And that's what I'm dreading, that I'll know in myself if I don't do that well, I'll know it's not me.

Sadie's talk weaves in and out of various vantage points; she moves from 'I', 'you', 'they' in a way that captures students' sense of powerlessness over educational achievement within a system that places greatest emphasis on the 'objective' examination. Although she now knows that 'you can end up getting a grade you don't deserve', she is also aware that exam results directly affect future opportunities and the ability 'to move on'. Her switch from 'I' to 'they' represents her frustration and fear that ultimately she does not have control over the

examination process in the way she feels in control of her learning process. It is examinations, ultimately, not herself, that will let her down.

However, although the tutor is constrained by the location of her/his work within the formal educational institution, and the student is the object of 'normalising judgements', the story is not entirely pessimistic. Education is a site of struggle, and as I have argued, has been affected by social movements such as feminism and anti-racism, and continues to be a site of possible change (Morley, 1999: 99). The discourse of access may be located within the wider discourse of the academy; however, its ideologies penetrate educational spaces, providing some opportunity for students to challenge the wider agenda. Although students do not have the power to reject the examination or assessment criteria in any direct way, they do have the power to reject its objectifying process, refusing to accept its values and ideologies. Although students may not always leave their courses as 'winners' or as 'success stories', they may leave with a re-defined notion of the academic world, rejecting the objective claims it makes and the subject positions it proposes to/imposes on students. An extract from an Access to Higher Education student, John, illustrates these issues:

John: I think I've decided that I don't belong at university.

PB: Why, why do you feel that way?

John: Why do I feel that way? Good question! Um, because I'm not so sure how much I agree with it for starters and I'm not – I don't know how I would respond to being there, that environment; it's just the whole emphasis. It's how you measure intelligence at the end of the day. For me it's not particularly somebody's um, intellectual ability; it's just that whole idea how, um, what value our society has towards intellectual greatness and to me it's a double-edged sword really. 'Cause it could also be the great failure of our society.

And later in the interview he adds:

[Access to Higher Education] gave me an injection of confidence on one level to be – to be me a bit more. You know, uh, I mean I don't feel intimidated or anything like that. I don't feel intimidated anymore by the whole idea of uh university and the wonders of university.

PB: Is that one of the reasons you feel you don't need to do it now maybe?

John: Possibly...Yeah. But, I'm not 100% sure if I don't want to do it, you know, but at the moment I don't feel there's a place for me there. I mean it could all be so different.

PB: How could it all be different?

John: How could it all be different? Gosh!

PB: Yeah, I mean tell me, ideally what would it be like?

John: What we need is the whole way education and the whole system to be completely redefined and um, from the very first, you know, tentative steps. I mean I'm speaking of adult education. The whole criteria...I don't know where to start. History should be about all cultures, and we do need to learn about British history but we need to learn about the negative effects of colonialism and all stuff like that. We need to incorporate the whole in every subject, everybody's point of view. Students need to have an opportunity to express their views and whatever their views are they need to be expressed and considered valid. Because people go to classes and immediately they feel inferior because they don't understand something. Which is a ridiculous situation, because what they are being taught anyway isn't necessarily the way things are anyway, and if they don't understand it there's no reason they should be made to feel inferior. To me education should be like a healing process, an exploration through knowledge of the world, and an exploration of the world. There's space and scope for everybody. Everyone is considered.

John's insights demonstrate the project ahead for those committed to educational and social change. His comments also highlight the position of the student within the complex web of institutional power, limiting liberatory possibilities and reminding us of the existing structural and discursive factors which continue to influence the experiences of individual tutors and students and the institutional barriers to creating social transformation.

Challenging the organisation and content of the curriculum and the politics of the academy remains a key area of necessary attention. Continually re-evaluating and reflexively examining our pedagogical approaches in the classroom is another area that deserves much focus, not only from researchers, but also from access tutors, who must then take their critiques into the mainstream to push for further change. Students' experiences, ideas and critiques provide a rich insight into the problems facing access education and provide a number of crucial areas that demand recognition and attention if we are serious about the widening educational participation project.

This chapter has revealed how access students' subject positions are re/produced through educational spaces as classed and gendered, while their identities become implicated in and through their participation in learning. In the next chapter, I concentrate on participants' representations of their experiences of access education in relation to their shifting identities and subject positions. Although they are positioned through dominant discourses of neo-liberalism as fixed and unified selves, they also experience their identities as shifting, contradictory and multiple.

Chapter Six: **(Re)Constructing the Self through Educational Participation**

Upon proof-reading this essay, it seems to finish in mid-sentence. I feel it reflects 'where I am' at the moment. I know that I will be able to keep adding to it as I start to choose the directions I take instead of being led by circumstances (Greg, coursework: A Self-Reflective Essay, 1999).

There is nothing wrong with change as long as it's for the best? Unfortunately this statement reflects only those who believe the best is for them. Those around us may have a different point of view. What we do have to consider is the consequences of each change. Are we prepared to take the chances and if so have any of us thought about the end result? (Vanessa, coursework: Changes, April 1998).

Introduction

In this chapter I examine participants' representations of their educational experiences in relation to their multiple identifications and subject positions. How do they experience their subjectivities as shifting while being positioned through dominant humanist discourses as fixed and unified selves regulated in particular ways as classed, gendered, raced and sexualised? I also pay attention to my own subjectivity in connection to their accounts. How have I represented their stories and how is subjectivity produced through our relationship as teacher/student and researcher/participant?

Feminist post/structuralist theory frames this examination. According to poststructuralist thought, the subject is constituted through discourse while the:

fully unified, completed secure and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with - at least temporarily' (Hall, 1992: 227).

Identity formation, a complex interaction between inner and outer worlds, is a de/stabilising project of 'becoming' rather than 'being'. This complex interaction is

represented through the concept 'subjectivity', which signifies the ways that participants understand and identify themselves in relation to the multiple contexts in which they are positioned and position themselves. The production of subjectivity is always an interactive, inconsistent and unstable process interlaced with the social, cultural and discursive. A feminist theorisation of subjectivity embraces the interrelation between the personal and social and 'the ways in which a person gives meaning to themselves, others and the world' (Davies and Banks, 1992: 2 cited in Jones, 1993: 158). Feminist post/structuralists are concerned with the complexity and diversity of gender and the ways people 'are both 'made subject' by/within the social order and how they are agents/subjects within/against it' (Jones, 1993: 158). Subjects, always in process, occupy multiple, changing and contradictory positions through shifting discursive practices:

The subject of post-structuralism, unlike the humanist subject, then is constantly in process; it only exists as process; it is revised and (re)presented through images, metaphors, storylines and other features of language, such as pronoun grammar; it is spoken and respoken, each speaking existing in a palimpsest¹ with others (Davies, 1997: 275).

Self, subject and subjectivity are the key themes of this chapter, exploring these in relation to participants' re-presentations of themselves, particularly in connection with the identification as student/learner. I am interested in how participants identify with the position 'student' in relation to who they think they are and how they come to feel they belong in educational spaces (or not). Education, although often associated with the possibility of self-discovery, intensifies the project of 'becoming' as an uncertain and unstable process. I use four related analytical tools to examine these themes: the positioned discourse and the shifting positions discourse (Mauthner, 1999: 79), the concept of identification (Hall, 1992:287) and the concept of positionality (Alcoff, 1988).

Melanie Mauthner formulates four discourses in her research on sister relationships; two of which I find useful for this chapter; the positioned discourse and the shifting positions discourse (Mauthner, 1999: 79). She describes these as 'analytical tools for conceptualising power relations and changing subjectivity' (*ibid.*). I find these analytical tools useful for thinking

about the dynamics of subjectivity through participants' re-presentations of their relationship to access education. Participants' accounts reveal the struggle involved as subjectivity changes through engagement with access education creating tensions between the production of self as fixed against the production of self as continually shifting.

Stuart Hall makes a distinction between 'identity' and 'identification', which resonates with Mauthner's two terms, in that this distinction captures the difference between imagining ourselves as 'being' rather than in the process of 'becoming'.

Thus, rather than speaking of identity as a finished thing, we should speak of *identification*, and see it as an on-going process. Identity arises, not so much from the fullness of identity which is already inside us as individuals, but from a *lack* of wholeness which is "filled" from *outside* us, by the ways we imagine ourselves to be seen by *others*. Psychoanalytically, the reason why we continually search for 'identity', constructing biographies which knit together the different parts of our divided selves into a unity, is to recapture this fantasised pleasure of fullness (plenitude) (Hall, 1992: 287-8, original emphases).

The desire for a complete and whole identity drives the search for self interrogated in this chapter. Many participants in this research find their way to education because of a longing for a clearly defined self-identity. In our common sense understanding, identity is perceived as fixed, individual, stable and unique. Well-used British expressions such as 'just be yourself' reinforce such shared understandings of what it means to be an individual in Western society. However, identity formation is far more complex than this, and is inextricably connected to a complex web of social relations, structures and discourses. Who we are on the inside is linked to the outer world, one that is characterised increasingly by change, instability and uncertainty. This chapter maps out the ways that participants come to identify themselves with multiple and contradictory positions within the nexus of social, cultural, economic, political and discursive relations. Although identity is fluid and changing, and possibilities for new identifications are forged through social change such as gender restructuring, there is some fixivity in the sense that social structures re/produce subjects through systemic inequities such as class, gender and 'race'. Although such

structural inequalities may have altered to some extent, new forms of classism, neo-colonialism, racism and sexism constrain and pre-exist our journey through, within and against different subject positions. As I have pointed out (see Chapter One and Two), this is why we need to address both the material and cultural levels of social injustice through the insights of structural *and* poststructural theories (Fraser, 1997). We also need to avoid the tendency of structural theories to place marginal groups into homogeneous categories and to eschew the ambivalence of poststructural theory about knowledge and truth which undermines the authority of marginal voices, needs and interests.

Alcoff usefully contributes the concept of 'positionality', to move beyond essential (feminist structural) and nominalist² (poststructural) positions. Two key points are expressed through her concept of positionality. The first is that 'the concept of woman is a relational term identifiable only within a (constantly moving) context'. Secondly that 'the position women find themselves in can be actively utilised (rather than transcended) as a location for the construction of meaning' (Alcoff, 1988: 434).

When the concept "woman" is defined not by a particular set of attributes but by a particular position, the internal characteristics of the person thus identified are not denoted so much as the external context within which that person is situated. The external situation determines the person's relative position, just as the position of a pawn on a chessboard is considered safe or dangerous, powerful or weak, according to its relation to the other chess pieces³. The essentialist definition of woman makes her identity independent of her external situation: since her nurturing and peaceful traits are innate they are ontologically autonomous of her position with respect to others or to the external historical and social conditions generally. The positional definition, on the other hand, makes her identity relative to a constantly shifting context, to a situation that includes a network of elements involving others, the objective economic conditions, cultural and political institutions and ideologies, and so on. If it is possible to identify women by their position within this network of relations, then it becomes possible to ground a feminist argument for women, not on a claim that their innate capacities are being stunted, but that their position within the network lacks power and mobility and requires radical change (*ibid.*: 433-4).

The concept of positionality enables an engagement with the idea that women 'occupy a range of social and cultural positions simultaneously' (Kenway et al, 1994: 199). I have used the concept of positionality to explore the ways that

participants in this study occupy a range of subject positions, while also understanding and experiencing themselves as fixed and stable. Becoming a learner intensifies these contradictory sensibilities of the self as fixed, regulated through dominant discourses, against a subjectivity that is oppositional⁴, multiple, complex and ever-changing. An examination of these contradictory sensibilities reveals the discursive inter-relation between subjectivity and experience.

In this chapter, I am interested in the ways that participants represent themselves through positioned discourse as autonomous individuals with a fixed and stable identity, for example English, working-class and feminine, while negotiating change through their interaction with access education. What does this mean in their lived experience as wives, mothers, daughters, sons, manual labourers, and so on? How does education operate as a catalyst for (the recognition of) shifting identities? Is education only experienced as a positive influence in their lives and relationships (as much access education rhetoric would suggest)? Is access education ever experienced as disruptive and contradictory or is it always experienced as progressive? What happens to subjects' sense of self as they take up the educational programmes made available to them through the policy of widening educational participation (with its own agenda - see Chapter Two)? Through a theory of identity as fluid, how might educational spaces be opened up to subjects that challenge identities constituted through dominant discourses and make available oppositional subject positions?

Education as a Search for Self

And, you know, I'd had Lewis, I had 2 children, I thought no, I don't want anymore. I had to find something for myself. I knew there was a me there. I'd done my bit as a mum. Now I had to go back and find a me. (Vanessa, recorded conversation, 1999)

A major theme emerging from the data was a search for self through educational participation. This project to 'find a me' is located within humanism assuming an essential, autonomous, pre-discursive self; a self with 'untapped potential':

PB: What happened to make you think about returning to education?

Charity: When I left secondary and went into the offices, I very quickly realised that, you know, I had all this potential that wasn't being utilised... (Charity, recorded conversation, 1999)

The idea of a self with untapped potential draws on a liberal meritocratic discourse, which positions access students as 'deserving returners'; individuals with 'talent and merit which could and should be given the opportunity to be developed' (Green and Webb, 1997: 138). This implies an essential self that simply *has* the potential to benefit from educational participation or does not. This is illustrated by my fieldnotes of a speech made by John Randall, Chief Executive of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) about the QAA Recognition Scheme for Access on 11 March 1999:

John Randall started his speech with the words: 'Access matters because standards matter' and expressed his great support for the movement to widen educational participation. However he then expressed his great concern that 'individuals who would not benefit from higher education should not be recruited to Access programmes, because this would mean setting them up for failure, and thereby creating bad role models for their children' (Research Diary, 11 March 1999).

What is written out of this discourse are the operations of selectivity through admissions policies which often reinforce social differentiation based on fixed categories that contain cultural and historical meanings associated with for example, social class, gender, nationality and 'race' (Williams, 1997c: 159). Through such discourses, participants are identified and identify themselves as deserving or undeserving, legitimate or illegitimate, through categories of 'standard' and 'non-standard', 'traditional' and 'non-traditional'. Sue Webb argues, for example, that access students applying for university places are positioned as 'non-standard' in comparison with the opposite; the 'normal' student following 'the traditional route to university through the acquisition in the sixth form of the required A levels *at 18*' (FEU, 1987: 2 cited in Webb, 1997: 68). A study

conducted by Bargh *et al* (1994) reinforces such discursive positioning by including as 'non-standard' all students without A levels and all mature and/or ethnic minority applicants with or without A levels (Webb, 1997: 68). Green and Webb found that the access students they interviewed adopted categories that had become familiar to them through the discursive practices of admissions tutors as well as through the forms that institutions requested them to complete in particular ways to produce monitoring and research data (1997: 151).

Such practices have legitimised the divisions between students using the categories of age, gender, 'race' and class as well as types of qualifications (*ibid.*).

Contradictorily, it is through liberal meritocratic discourse that the 'non-standard' student can be rescued as 'deserving' and 'legitimate' when they are positioned as essentially containing 'untapped potential', while, simultaneously, categories such as 'non-standard' used within this discourse re/position students as 'worthy' or 'unworthy' according to their positionality and qualifications. Within the discursive field of education, the availability of the liberal meritocratic discourse of the 'deserving student with untapped potential' enables specific subjects (those deemed to possess academic potential) to reconsider the identity of learner. How certain subjects become positioned as having potential while others do not, is left silent within the discourse.

This liberal meritocratic discourse, embedded in humanism, conceptualises education as a project essentially about individual and social progress. The notion of individual progress presupposes a unitary and continuous self, while social progress is a key aim of the project of modernity. It is through education that individual and social progress might be achieved as students are taught the power of science, objectivity and positivism as the route to enlightenment through logic and reason. As Lather explains:

Humanism posits the subject as an autonomous individual capable of full consciousness and endowed with a stable "self" constituted by a set of static characteristics such as sex, class, race, sexual orientation. Such a subject has been at the heart of the Enlightenment project of progress via education, reflexive rationality, and human agency (Lather, 1991: 5)

During interviews, both participants and I continually reproduced this idea that education is centrally about progress:

Kerry: And I think he thought you know you need to be home because of the children and why do you feel the need to go to college and my answer was I want to better myself...

PB: Mmmm

Kerry: Which is what people do isn't it, why they go to college?

PB: Yeah (Kerry, recorded conversation, 1999)

However, ideas about progress have been thrown into question through the poststructuralist critique of positivism, pointing up:

The inadequacies of positivist assumptions in the face of human complexity... We live in a period of dramatic shift in our understanding of scientific inquiry, an age which has learned much about the nature of science, its inner workings and its limitations (Lather, 1991: 2).

The notion of progress, both social and individual, is therefore made problematic by poststructuralist theory. Progress itself is only a discourse, rather than the ultimate truth to be reached through scientific reason, because meanings around progress are not fixed and universally shared. What may represent 'progress' to an eugenicist, for example, may be very different from what would be seen as progress by a socialist feminist or an access tutor. Hegemonic discourses of individual progress contain narratives about 'success' and success is measured in terms of competition with other individuals within a social hierarchical framework. This common sense link between widening educational participation, individual progress and success is encapsulated in the title 'Learning to Succeed' in the government's white paper on lifelong learning (June 1999). A student who makes progress is successful in demonstrating particular skills and competencies, those deemed as most valuable and suitable by educationalists who have,

'objectively', set the curriculum and assessment targets. The final test of making progress, in this paradigm, would be finding employment, particularly that with relative status and financial reward. For example, the College's Return to Study validation document reads in section 2.3:

The student has completed a course of study which has enabled them to be a successful adult learner. The student has learnt to be motivated and insodoing has become an effective positive person. S/he is equipped with the basic skills to study efficiently and effectively, as well as to think clearly. As a result of these studies the student is now better prepared to find work, develop a career or continue to study at a higher level (Return to Study validation document, September 1995).

I am not trying to argue here that gaining Basic Skills or having better paid and more fulfilling work opportunities are not desirable and should not be what educational participation is partially about. However, I am trying to deconstruct the taken-for-granted meanings embedded in the discourses of widening educational participation and its significance in/for the lives of access students and in the production of their subjectivities through discursive practices. The project of 'success' is always understood as positive and desirable within hegemonic discourses, despite the anguish and pain the drive for success often causes (Lucey, 2000). Certainly, these meanings often produce the ways that participants understand themselves as learners and reproduce the notion that education should be taken up for instrumental reasons only.

Yet, participants' accounts reveal that education does not *only* represent instrumental oriented meanings around progress and success. Education also represents, for example, a space for self.

Mapping Out A Space for Self through Educational Participation

Tamboukou argues that a historical examination of women's auto/biographies documents their strategic use of education to resist 'the space restrictions imposed upon their lives' and to attempt to create 'new space boundaries for

themselves...beyond masculinist geographical closures' (1999: 127). Her argument certainly resonates with women participants' narratives, which represent education as providing a space for self:

And [college] was for me, because I found it so fascinating anyway...I just want to go because I like being there because I like the learning process and because I wanna just be in that atmosphere and that's all it is (Vanessa, recorded conversation, 1999).

I've not done this for anybody else. I've done this for me (Linda, recorded conversation, 1999).

Interestingly, many participants described, both explicitly and implicitly, education as becoming an available space through motherhood:

Having children gave me the space to think about education (Charity, recorded conversation, 1999).

When my son was two I decided that I wanted to do something with my life (Kerry, written autobiography, 1999).

A study on mature women students found similar patterns, although choices to return to education were linked more directly to children growing older than simply becoming a mother (Pascall & Cox, 1993: 62- 64). Respondents in their study expressed 'the inadequacy of a life experienced through motherhood' exposed as children grew older (*ibid.*: 64).

In this research, many participants' narratives suggested motherhood not only provides the space for education, but, as illustrated by participants' comments above, education provides the space for self. The idea of women claiming their own space has a long history, as eloquently argued by Virginia Woolf in her essay 'A Room of One's Own' (Woolf, 1994 first published 1929). Although second-wave feminism has positively influenced many women's lives⁵, women are still often characterised through the patriarchal discourses of femininity as

naturally selfless while men are constructed as innately self-oriented. Such characterisations continue to be heightened through the discursive field of motherhood (Merrill, 1999: 114-115; Nicolson, 1997; Pascall & Cox, 1993: 62). As Britton and Baxter explain:

For women to prioritise their own needs is to challenge both the cultural assumptions about women's place and the patriarchal domestic division of labour (Britton and Baxter, 1999: 190).

Discourses change over time of course, and it is now more acceptable for women to demand some time and space for themselves, although this is always measured against their ability to fulfil and prioritise their role as 'good mothers' first⁶. Participants who were mothers continually revealed feelings of guilt in relationship to their learning, seen as a deviant activity stealing their time and energies away from their rightful responsibilities as mothers.

The students spent a lot of time discussing their negative experiences within the communities they lived in. They described the ways that 'women in cliques' at 'the school' reacted to them going to college. They felt other people, and particularly other mothers, were highly critical of them as 'time-wasters' who should be spending their time and energy on their children, working to be better mothers (Research diary, January 1998).

Vanessa: I must admit I did feel guilty for going, whenever I, when I got to college, when I was actually in the classroom it felt good, it felt really nice... And then when I left I was not depressed but really sad, I thought no I want to stay there all day. And I did feel guilty for going, which...

PB: Why did you feel guilty?

Vanessa: Oh well this is something that caused...When me and [my husband] were having problems we went to see a counsellor, and she said to me my problem is that I have a problem with feeling guilty when I'm doing something for myself, and that's something that I've got to learn not to do...So, basically I suppose that's why I felt guilty because it was something I was doing for myself,

when I felt I should have been at home, even though Luke was like at nursery school. (Vanessa, recorded conversation 1999)

Valerie Hey reveals forms of 'emotional restructuring' in her essay on the gendered effects of the marketisation of schooling, and argues that 'one form of emotional readjustment is shaped through the mobilisation and amplification of female guilt' (Hey, 1996: 356). Certainly, the lifelong learning discourse on one level operates on mobilising female guilt. It implicitly addresses 'parents' (the dominant discourse continually ignores the gendered division of labour in the domestic sphere) who have a responsibility to take up lifelong learning because 'good parents' should learn to help themselves to help their children. I am not disputing that there are benefits to participating on lifelong learning initiatives for many women. However, I am contesting the common sense leap that 'helping themselves' is about 'helping their children'. It is interesting that participants, while expressing feelings of guilt, continually justify their educational participation as something that is to benefit their children.

The time has now come for me to improve my situation so that all the knowledge and experience I gain will be of use to my family and future employment (Louise, autobiography, 1999).

Being a mother has helped the learning because I've set myself goals because of the kids. I had to overcome my fear of going to college because I want a better life for me and my children (Charlotte, recorded conversation, 2000).

It seems that part of the 'good parent' discourse now includes the responsibility to actively improve the opportunities of children through strategically planning upward social mobility, forming yet another pressure for mothers to prove their success. Such responsibility is embedded in the neo-liberal narrative about competitive individuals who, in a society seen as classless, capitalise on equally available opportunities to provide the 'best' life possible for their children. All this is seen to be achievable through lifelong learning programmes that are also understood as universally available and accessible. Class, disability, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and 'race' are written out of the discourse. Gaining educational

access becomes a parental *responsibility* as well as, or even over and above, an individual *right*. 'Parental responsibility' is presented as an ungendered concept, and families are positioned as individual autonomous units, expected to exercise both their citizen rights and responsibilities and contribute to, rather than drain, national stability and competitiveness (Giddens, 1998: 94-8). The discourse ignores all differences between and within families.

Discourses of Educational Participation and Lifelong Learning

New Labour policies of widening educational participation and lifelong learning position the subject as an individual who must compete through gaining specific skills to be adaptable and flexible to changes in the employment market.

In the Green paper *The Learning Age* we set our vision of how lifelong learning could enable everyone to fulfil their potential and cope with the challenge of rapid economic and social change. Lifelong learning can enable people to play a full part in developing their talent, the potential of their family, and the capacity of the community in which they live and work. It can and must nurture a love for learning. This will ensure the means by which our economy can make a successful transition from the industries and services of the past, to the knowledge and information economy of the future. It also contributes to sustaining a civilised and cohesive society, in which people develop as active citizens and in which generational disadvantage can be overcome.

The skill needs of the future will be different from those of today and it is clear that we will not keep pace with the modern economies of our competitors, if we are unable to match today's skills with the challenge of the developing information and communication age of tomorrow. As labour markets change, we must develop a new approach to skills, and to enabling people, and businesses, to succeed (Foreword by the Secretary of State, David Blunkett, DfEE, June 1999).

Within this text the subject is conceptualised as an active citizen within a social/national framework of a host of rights and responsibilities. Education is presented as both a right and a responsibility; all citizens have the right to educational access *because of* their responsibility to adapt to change by updating their skills according to and dictated by the needs of national and global economies. As I have argued elsewhere in this thesis (see Chapter Two), education becomes collapsed into a national training project to regenerate the

economy. Yet such texts present the notion of citizenship as an 'unproblematic, ungendered concept, free from class and cultural associations' (Standing, 1999: 57).

Participants are positioned within such policy texts as individual citizens who, regardless of their background and through equal opportunities policies, should take up the available opportunities to 'improve themselves for the better'. The process of 'improving' is understood as not only of benefit to the individual, but also to her/his family, and to the country as a whole, and therefore is constructed as a strategy for national improvement. What is good for the country is therefore seen as good for the individual and vice versa. However, such meanings around education have consequences for the adult learner who chooses, for example, Social Science subjects, (often seen as unrelated to job seeking and therefore a luxury/leisure activity) over a course in computing skills (often seen as a good choice and directly related to seeking employment):

Vanessa: The trouble is I get so frustrated, because there's still so much I want to do-o, and I took Psychology and my husband was saying things to me, "why are you taking that? What's it gonna get you? Get you a job?" And I said, "it's not the point. It shows I have actually gone back and done something" (Vanessa, recorded conversation, 1999).

Although policy texts present the 'lifelong learner' in quite specific ways, participants do not understand the decision to return to formal learning as only linked to parental and citizen responsibilities. John, for example, makes sense of his 'choice' to return to education in a way that challenges mainstream discourses of widening participation:

John: I was disillusioned with school and my aspiration was I wanted to - to find happiness inside.

PB: Did you have any idea how you were going to do that?

John: I had no idea about how I was going to go about it. All I knew was that at 16 I had to leave school and I had to go and get a job. I mean I wasn't ready for it, but that's what I had to do and that's what I did do. You know, at 16.

PB: Where did you work?

John: Well, I guess my whole working...uh...from the moment I left school because I was in such...I just had a thirst for something but I didn't know what it was. And because of that I just fell into jobs, people that I knew, or somebody I knew knew somebody, you know, so it was all like that, all my working life its been like that. Its never been me that's sat down and you know, its always been someone that's got a job and "alright I can do it" and that's how its always been. Even to the job that I do now with my brother. You know, it was him that said "do you want to come work with me" and so I said "ok".

PB: So you carried on like that obviously for a while and then somewhere along the line you decided to return to education...

John: Yeah somewhere along the line. My first, my first thought about returning to education - I think I was about 20, by which time, you know, my little inner quest turned its self outwards into the fight for, you know, social justice, and I was raging for this. And I thought I must go back to education so I applied to an Access course when I was 22 and - against my better judgement I'd say actually. Because I didn't feel - it was a kind of a half-hearted attempt to do something you know, and that was something that I thought that I could do to contribute in some way. So I applied for an Access course and they were oversubscribed so fortunately I didn't get in. Instinctively I knew it wasn't the right thing to do. I really did. Because I was very very wary of you know, not necessarily the educational system, but the intellectual - the whole intellectual mindset thing, you know. I didn't want to get involved in it, because I knew I would just become even more frustrated and even more chewed up inside. So fortunately I didn't get in.

John then spent two years working with his father in the factory, which he described as 'terrible and fantastic', because 'it grounded [him] and surrounded

[him] with lots of people with lots of problems'. He was then unemployed for two years, which he describes as 'quite a revelation to me':

John: It was quite a positive process, you know, being out of the system in that way, and being so isolated and...you know when all the alienation and everything is gone, when I stopped making a comparison with me and everyone else and how I didn't fit in...when that process stopped it began to be a wonderful process, like almost a healing process. It gave me time and room to breathe at last after all this time.

After two years of unemployment, his brother offered him a job where he's stayed for six years. When I asked him what brought him back to the Access course, he explains:

John: Well, I think what brought me here was - there was something that was still undone in my mind about, uh, the intelligentsia if you like. Something that I hadn't settled in my mind. And I needed to come because I needed to settle it and I needed to make a decision once and for all. And that was one reason. And the other reason was, you know, the nature of the work my brother and I do...it's very very demanding. I've got an injury on my knee because of it, and I've got an injury on my heart because of it and basically my body is not coping with it anymore and the time is right to try again.

PB: When you came to apply for the course, did you have those same feelings you had the first time you applied for an Access course when you were 20?

John: Yeah

PB: You did, you had those feelings again. But you pursued it anyway, you persevered...

John: I did, I did 'cause, I mean, I guess it was really to do with the position with the job, I was exhausted and my body was broken and I knew that in a sense that this was my final option, you know, so that's why I pursued it I guess. I mean if I

was healthy and fit maybe I wouldn't have but because I wasn't I did. (John, recorded conversation, 1999)

John's educational experiences and 'choices' are shaped by his positionality as a white, working-class male. His understandings about his subjectivity and experiences of learning, work and relationships are formed by his positionality, which leads him to question and challenge the dominant neo-liberal discourses surrounding him that fail to connect with his lived and material reality. His narrative demonstrates the ability of the subject to actively make meaning against dominant modes of thinking. It also reveals a search for space free of surveillance, which he discovers briefly through a period of unemployment, a space that enables him to contest and redefine social and personal meanings. Yet, simultaneously, John's story demonstrates the material constraints imposed by structures of class and gender and the limitations of being positioned as a working-class male. Although he struggles against these oppressive factors, his material existence continues to be influenced by them, because, for example, he has no other 'choice' but to take the hard physical work available to him as a working-class man (Connell, 1995: 55; Willis, 1977). Connell's concept of 'body reflexive practices' sheds light on the constraints and control available to John in relation to his sense of self (Connell, 1995). For example, the position as manual labourer most available to him as a working-class man profoundly affects his body and ultimately his decision to return to education. Yet his new position as 'student' is contradictory to hegemonic versions of white working-class masculinity tied to physical labour. Just as contradictorily, his decision to participate in education was not about the quest for success, progress or citizen responsibility of neo-liberal discourse as outlined above. It represented instead a hope and longing for emancipatory spaces, inner happiness and social justice.

Linda's decision to return to education was also not informed by dominant discourses, but influenced by her doctor who saw the possibilities of education providing her with the tools to challenge dominant discourses of femininity. When Linda fell into a period of depression, her doctor recommended an assertiveness course:

Since then I've never looked back...the assertiveness gave me the confidence to come to college on my own (Linda, recorded conversation, 1999).

Linda, her subjectivity produced through a feminised discourse of self-sacrifice, explains her experience of depression as a consequence of continually attempting to please others, which is why her doctor advised her to take an assertiveness course. Her educational participation is motivated by her desire to validate and address her own needs as equally important as the needs of her family.

Sadie also found education after a period of deep depression; she was suicidal and isolated herself completely from others. She only trusted her doctor who recommended a course. She says:

Going to college was just a distraction to stop thinking about all the terrible things (Sadie, recorded conversation, 1999).

Sadie, a working-class white woman, had experienced domestic violence (towards her mother by her stepfather) and emotional abuse (from her stepfather and stepmother) as a child. She turned this inward by refusing to eat, the one area of her life where she felt she had some power and control. Consequently, she suffered physical illness throughout her schooling, causing huge gaps in her education. At secondary school, she describes herself as an outsider, mainly because she was desexualised and marginalised through a popular story of the 'normal' healthy heterosexually-oriented teen-aged girl. The emotional abuse and trauma she suffered throughout her childhood, adolescence and entrance to adulthood led her into depression and suicidal tendencies. Initially, she returned to education simply to drown out the painful memories that tortured her. However, she soon discovered that learning brought her great pleasure, as well as the possibility for social mobility.

John, Linda and Sadie all came to education as a final 'choice' after suffering physically and emotionally from the kinds of material, physical and emotional pressures and difficulties associated with their gender and class positionality. The competing discourses available to these three participants and the experiential

aspects of these are structural and cultural; culminating in gendered, sexualised and classed oppressions. Yet these competing discourses and experiences also eventually made the subjectivity of learner, active agent and knower available to them.

A deconstruction of my representations reveal my own desire for continuity, and for an understanding of time as linear and education as a progressive project. Education is conceptualised through both their accounts and my recounting of these as positive and as something that is always 'good' for people. However, a poststructuralist reading of such accounts exposes the pain, as well as the pleasure, the contradiction as well as the continuity, the confusion as well as the clarity, with which education as a search for self is experienced. I will explore this in the following section.

The (Re)Construction of Different Separate 'Me's'

Participants also recognise themselves as positioned in multiple ways (e.g. as wife, mother, student, friend, carer, sister, daughter, worker, etc) and experience the contradictions and confusions between and within these multiple positions and subjectivities. A tendency however seems to be to attempt to divide these neatly up into private/public selves, drawing on a patriarchal discourse that separates the private and the public into binary spheres. The different strands of self are seen as separate and compatible, rather than as overlapping, conflictual, contradictory, fragmented and discontinuous. This resistance to engaging with a contradictory and multiple subjectivity causes tensions and is embedded in the binary conceptualisation of, for example, the (female) caring self-sacrificial mother and the (male) autonomous self-oriented worker.

PB: How have you managed learning and your other responsibilities at the same time? Learning and your work at home as a - as a mother...

Vicky: It's a role. It's really strange 'cause every part of life is a role. You act a role, don't you. You go to college, you do your work. You study. You come home, you are the mum, you cook the dinner, you do the ironing. And I go to the gym -

I'm a different person. I cope really well. And I've sectioned every part off...its really strange, but if I want to go out with my friends, have a great time and a laugh and a drink, that is me...the single me whose having - got no responsibilities and I enjoy myself. When I'm the wife and the mum I'm at home and here for them.

However Vicky's strategy to divide herself up into separate 'me's' is partially a reaction to the policing of her sexuality and gender re/position(ing) taking place in her home. She describes how her husband and nineteen-year-old son interrogate her whenever she leaves the house:

Vicky: Now I'm like neglecting [my husband] a bit and I want to go out with the girls now and again and have some fun clubbing and do my work, and I have quite a responsible job where I work and...he's like, before I go out he might turn around and say 'where have you been?'...'how long have you been?'...'where are you going?' and it's just - too much. Sunday was an example...my husband was working and my eldest son come downstairs about 11 o'clock and I was going out and he said 'where you going?'. And I really didn't want to tell him where I was going, it was private to me where I was going. So he said 'where are you going?' and I said 'I'm not telling you where I'm going' and he said 'why, have you got something to hide?' And I just walked out and thought 'I don't need this and I don't have to tell everyone where I'm going!'

It seems, from participants' accounts, that the shifting position discourses available to working-class women students through access education may cause complex tensions, dilemmas and struggles for their positioned discourse within the family. Although an aim of critical and feminist access education is to disrupt the oppressions located within the positioned discourse, the process of negotiating a way through changing and contradictory subjectivities may be a painful one.

How can I put it...in a way...now I'm doing what I want to do, I feel as though certain people are watching me and it's suffocating me...the suffocation frightens me (Vicky, recorded conversation, 1999).

Similarly, another student described to me the pain of being 'watched' at home since returning to education:

I bumped into one of my former students in the shop today and she immediately began to confide in me about how she was feeling. She explained that her relationship with her husband had become increasingly difficult, and he was always watching what she did or didn't do. She felt completely constrained by him. As a consequence, she claimed she wasn't doing much of anything at all, but kept talking very positively about the change that had started within her when she returned to education. Through education, she explained, she began to really think about and question things, but felt this was intensifying the problems between her and her husband. (Research diary, 10 August 1999)

As participants' struggle to discover new spaces for self, 'somewhere to retreat...somewhere beyond control, beyond surveillance' (Tamboukou, 1999: 133), the space they occupy in the domestic sphere becomes more heavily policed by others. As Tamboukou argues, '[s]pace is fundamental in any exercise of power'. She further elaborates:

Home seems to operate as a 'panopticon', Bentham's architectural device, which for Foucault represents the triumph of disciplinary technology (Foucault, 1991, pp. 195-228). In such conditions of permanent visibility, women seem to be always watched, to the smallest detail of their activities. Home is therefore turned to a locale were [sic] even if there are discontinuities and dispersion in the gaze of the other, women's integral surveillance is being carried on (Tamboukou, 1999: 132).

Classed and Gendered Subjectivities

As I have argued above, the search for self is a classed and gendered (as well as raced and sexualised) search. For example, Vanessa positions herself through the discourse of class and gender, in relation to her husband and children:

PB: What did [your husband] think?

Vanessa: That I was just gonna be really brainy and not want him - not want him and the kids and I'd want a different life altogether and go be with all these really intellectual people. I mean that wasn't the case at all and I'd say to him 'look this is for me so that I can go out and get the job that I want'.

Her talk, in relationship to her family, plays with the idea of a 'brainy' self, drawing on the positioned discourse of class and gender:

Vanessa: Yeah and I stuck it for a little while, and then I thought this is wrong if I have to do that then he's got to try and understand that I'm – well it's someone training for a job isn't it – umm – he'd have to try and – for me that's what it was – you know I'm training myself up to be something different – NOT like I say to be extremely intellectual because I'm not it's just I've got some brains there and I want to use them and I never have done in the past and now, I suppose at my time of life, I feel it's what I want to do – and the kids see it as well, I mean uh I don't know if them loving school like they do is anything to do with me you know getting up in the mornings and going to college and stuff like that. Maybe it is, but they see me doing my work...and 'cause Chrissy will be going to Juniors in September and she says "oh you get homework with that!" and maybe me bringing my homework home and she sees Mummy doing it it'll give her an incentive...

PB: Mm

Vanessa: and Dan started saying things like "oh, I think she'll end up going to university" and I say "no I don't think she's that way inclined" – she'll probably go to college, because she's quite intellectual herself but umm, but yeah, it was difficult, there were a lot of times that I gave up...

Throughout the interview, Vanessa reminds both herself and me that she is at college to train for work not to go to university. Her use of the word 'training' is carefully selected over 'education' to signify her classed position, refusing the production of an intellectual self through educational participation. Her conversation then leads back to the relationship between studenthood and

motherhood, reverting to her responsibilities as a mother being a primary motivation for participating in access education. The discourses that she draws on seem to regulate the re/production of her subjectivity as a married working-class mother. To reconceptualise herself as 'too brainy' would be a rejection of her identity as the wife of a working-class man, and would address the discontinuities that she is experiencing as uncomfortable and problematic as she precariously weaves her way through access education while attempting to maintain her position as wife and mother.

Similarly she positions herself as a working-class employee, drawing on the feminised discourse of caring. The contradiction is that although she is 'training [her]self to be something different', she resists a radical change in the reconstruction of her subjectivity through education.

Vanessa: You see I like that, I like taking care of people, looking after them...umm... I'm gonna go to the Careers Guidance and see if I can find out more about it.... But I'd like, I think I'd like, I wouldn't necessarily like to teach teach, I'd like to focus around...[long pause]

PB: Support?

Vanessa: Yeah, umm, mature students, like in there, and I don't know maybe do some sort of teaching as in well, I don't know if you can teach anyone how to focus really when it comes to studying and that...

Vanessa plays around with the subjectivity 'teacher', however pushes it away as she does not recognise it to be available to her (and perhaps it isn't) while positioned as a working-class woman. Her explanation for her interest in teaching centres on her feminised identity as a caring self.

Marie is far more explicit about tensions between a sense of her self as fixed through class and her shifting subjectivity through education:

PB: Are there any other obstacles you can think of in terms of your ability to benefit from education?

Marie: Well, I think that the class thing as well comes into it. Even though I feel quite confident, I still go into situations where I feel, you know, people are not like me. So I suppose that's part of it. And just that - just that no one else has those expectations of me...its not expected that I achieve anything...my family [her parents and sister] are just...you know whereas if they were sort of saying - if they were encouraging or even questioning, you'd think 'oh I must get on with it' but its not as though I even think 'oh because they don't care I've got to achieve something - I've got to do it' because its just irrelevant to them [laughing] so its just you know...nothing.

Marie imagines what it would mean to be positioned as the daughter of middle-class parents, signified by her pronoun choice: 'you'd think "oh, I must get on with it"'. Her parents' working-class position is inscribed on her subjectivity, and as she engages with the middle-class discourses of the academy, and the nursing profession, she is positioned as an outsider: 'People are not like me'.

Constructing the Outsider: Otherness and Difference

Marie fantasises about fitting in to educational and medical sites through middle-class positionality. Otherness and difference are areas of dis/identification that shape participants' experiences as access students. At one point in our recorded conversation Marie rejects identification with the subject position 'student':

PB: What was it like to be part of a group of students?

Marie: [long pause] I don't identify myself as a student! [she laughs] When you say that - I think of the women in that group - I suppose we were students...but I just think of us as a group of women and friends and people I'd made acquaintances with - I wouldn't look at us as a group of students. That might sound mad but that's how I felt. It was more like people who were doing the same

thing as me, you know they didn't become close friends but they were friends and people to talk to.

Yet in other moments of the conversation, she described herself explicitly as a student:

As a mature student its easier, because of the way you're treated by the tutors and its your responsibility, and you know if you want to do it you can, if you don't want you don't have to. But its harder to achieve in other ways - family life, commitments. It's an alien environment to me (Marie, recorded conversation, 2000).

Although she identifies as a student here, she positions herself as different by labelling herself 'mature student' and by describing herself as occupying an 'alien environment' when she attends the College. She positions herself as 'not fitting in' as a student and in educational spaces.

(Not) fitting in was a common theme throughout conversations with participants. Schooling was an experience often described as centring on the attempt to fit in with peers, which was contrasted to not needing to fit in at the College. This was a particularly significant concern throughout Sadie's narrative of educational participation. The transition from not fitting in at secondary school, due to 'physically not belonging' to fitting in with the popular girls, after choosing to eat and gain some weight 'to get' a boyfriend, radically altered her experience of schooling from dread to pleasure. Finding a boyfriend meant that she "felt like one of them"; she relaxed in her lessons and for the first time spoke up in class, because before she "didn't want to be seen". Her choice to leave the sixth form was largely influenced by the absence of the 'popular girls' who did not stay on at school, a social group she identified with at that moment. At work as a cleaner she felt "totally out of place" because the other cleaners were older women:

I just didn't feel part of it and you need to to enjoy your work (Sadie, recorded conversation, 1999).

In her other jobs, she perceived herself as incompetent, although her bosses seemed to think she was "fine". Her identity as incompetent was constructed through her continual comparison of herself with 'the other women' where she worked who were "really confident" and "could laugh when they made mistakes". Comparing work to school, she felt she was always being watched and says:

If someone watches me, my mind goes blank. I thought 'I'm terrible at everything'.

Sadie stopped working, stayed in her bedroom and completely isolated herself, fantasising about death. It was through such despair that her doctor, a woman who she regards as a lifelong ally, suggested she take a course at the College. She enrolled on two GCSE courses, which she represents as entirely different from school:

The tutors were more relaxed and it was your choice to come to college. You were not put on the spot, not shouted at. I didn't exactly fit in, but that didn't matter much. I am happier now in my A level class because I fit in more with everyone else (Sadie).

Sadie's identification as a learner has often collided with her identification as 'not/fitting in'. Vanessa also speaks about not/fitting in as central to her shifting identity as a student:

I know I have bad days, everyone does, and to find myself, but look ever since I was younger, I always had to fit in with other people just to have friends, and I got fed up with doing that and I thought 'no, I just want to be me, and if people don't like me then I won't bother with them'. And I remember at school I was doing things, when I just wanted to get on with my work, but I was rebelling purely because I wanted to have friends. And then there were friends that would get me to do things that were purely against my nature. I remember at school thinking one day - we were queuing up to get our dinner - it was at secondary school - and I looked around and thought everybody's an alien! I really believed everybody was just like an alien because I felt I couldn't be me, you know, because they were like...Even sometimes I had dreams about people being aliens,

because they can't let me be me and, umm, have they got any emotions, do they understand what I'm feeling? (Vanessa, recorded conversation, 1999)

She explains her shifting subjectivity as based in and through her educational participation, and in her relationship with me, her first tutor at college:

Vanessa: When I used to look at people and think 'oh if only I could be like that' - like when I first met you - I used to think if only I could be like Penny and...and then like you started like doing this thesis and I thought oh yeah...she... And then I thought 'oh, I don't need to do that!' You are you and I am me and I don't need to be like you! I have gained so much confidence in myself!

PB: That's wonderful!

It is first through a connection with me, not simply as her tutor but as another mature woman student that she feels a desire to 'fit in' with me. However, through the process of change she rejects this desire, deciding that 'you are you and I am me and I don't need to be like you'. She frames this shift through the concept of 'increased confidence'.

Gaining Confidence

Kerry similarly constructs her shifting subjectivity through the notion of 'gaining confidence'. She suggests that she no longer needs to 'fit in', describing a shift in her subjectivity from being "fearful of education" to having "inner confidence":

PB: What do you enjoy most about being in College? Can you put it into words...I'm thinking of things like the teaching methods, as well...

Kerry: Oh definitely that. It's not so much to do with my fellow students anymore, because I don't have...like our class on Return to Study...it was very friendly and I looked after Marie's son and it was all very friendly. Now in Sociology, there's a man whose son is in my son's class. But we don't really, you know, we say hello and all that, but umm, I sit on my own [small pause and laugh] and it's the same

in Science. I sit on my own. But that is not a priority for me now. With you [on Return to Study] it was getting through something that was really fearful and scary and intimidating. Now I'm happy to work...I talk to the students but it's just a passing remark...it doesn't go outside of the classroom. They would be there if I needed help, but I concentrate better on my own. But it doesn't bother me, I don't go there thinking 'oh I've got no one to talk to'...my whole outlook on learning has changed.

PB: OK, how has it changed?

Kerry: It's easier. I'm not scared anymore. I don't mind learning - I know I can do it. It's so much easier now than it was then. Because I haven't got the inhibitions that I had then, I haven't carried them with me. Because I'm more confident, if you remember from Return to Study, I wasn't very confident at all. I lacked confidence terribly. But now I have an inner confidence, that I know I can do it, whether you think I can or not. I know what I can do, and I know what I can't do, and it's up to me whether I do it or not. (Kerry, recorded conversation, 1999)

Kerry constructs herself through a newly discovered position as 'confident' and able to make independent decisions about her life, resonating with the discourse of empowerment at the heart of much access education. She no longer requires the approval or even the support of her peers, which she did when she constructed herself as an individual with 'inhibitions'. I explore Kerry's and other participants' understanding of education as intimidatory in another chapter (see Chapter Five). What is of interest here is the way Kerry maps out her shifting position from a 'fearful' student to a 'confident' student, able to self-determine her level of ability, rather than be determined through the criteria of the other; the tutor as expert. Although aware of a shifting self, Kerry also constructs herself through the positioned discourse of humanism as an autonomous, fixed and essential individual when she claims: "I know what I can do, and I know what I can't do". Furthermore, her narratives construct subject positions that appear to be without class, gender, or 'race' positioning.

Yet much feminist theory conceptualises 'confidence' as a gendered phenomenon, which has influenced access education, particularly access provision that is specifically targeting women returners (McGivney, 1993, 1998; Coats, 1994).

Lack of confidence has frequently been invoked to account for the lack of educational success of women and the discourse of access has incorporated these ideas so that the notion of confidence-building has informed the organisation of many courses for women returners (McGivney, 1993) (Green and Webb, 1997: 138).

The feminist analysis that confidence is gendered has made an important contribution to developing education specifically for women. However, there are also weaknesses in the analysis. For example, the idea that lack of confidence accounts for women's 'lack of educational success', once deconstructed, reveals threads of the kind of essentialism Alcoff takes issue with as outlined at the beginning of this Chapter. Women are seen as lacking, and this is based on either an essentialist understanding of innate sexual differences between men and women or a socially deterministic explanation of gender socialisation that results in women's low self-esteem. Volosinov challenges the notion of 'inner confidence' in relation to social class:

Individualistic confidence in oneself, one's sense of personal value, is drawn not from within, not from the depths of one's personality, but from the outside world. It is the ideological interpretation of one's social recognizance and tenability of rights, and of the objective security and tenability provided by the whole social order, of one's individual livelihood (Volosinov, 1973: 89 cited in Kehily, 1995: 27).

Volosinov reveals meanings around 'confidence' as constructed through social hierarchies, attaching 'confidence' to social class positioning rather than gender positioning. Both feminist and Volosinov's analyses are useful in making connections between confidence and positionality. Participants' subjectivities shift from 'lacking confidence', drawing on dominant discourses of working-class femininity, to 'feeling confident and independent', drawing on dominant discourses of middle-class masculinity. As participants begin to identify with middle-class sensibilities, and imagine themselves as socially mobile through gaining educational credentials, they gain the sense of 'social recognisance and

tenability of rights' as well as the 'objective security and tenability' described by Volosinov. It is important that access students are involved in such deconstructions of their subjectivity, to examine the hidden meanings embedded in individualistic discourses that serve to render invisible the influence of social structures and competing discourses in the ways subjects come to see themselves as 'not confident' or 'confident'. This might help to create the space for engagement with oppositional discourses.

Educational Space for Constructing Oppositional Subjectivities

Through the feminist post/structural theory of identity as fluid and positional, how might access education provide space(s) for students to deconstruct their subjectivities as constituted through dominant discourses and reconstruct different oppositional subjectivities? This question forms the focus of this final section. Identity trans/formation is a crucial area of exploration in the project of education for social justice, particularly at the cultural level. It is through identity that hegemonic discourses are reproduced; it is also through identity that discourses might be radically challenged and transformed.

The shift that Kerry mapped out above, from an 'inhibited and fearful' self to a 'confident' self, parallels many of the participants' accounts of how they understand themselves as changing through education:

Imagine like, I don't know, like I'm a seed, and I have been planted into the soil. Well two years ago, I was still in the soil. Now, like two years on I'm like the shoot. So umm really within the next year or two I might be the flower. But, I've just got to build up slowly. So I can't, I would really like to do Law, it does really interest me, but umm, at the moment I'm not strong enough to say I'll do Law, just not confident yet, but I'll get there. I know I will (Mrs Jones, recorded conversation, 1999).

The metaphor Mrs Jones uses here of herself as a seed conjures images of an essential self, one that grows in a progressive and predictable way, slowly reaching towards the ultimate point of growth as the flower. It certainly draws on

notions of individual progress discussed earlier in the chapter. However, she also represents herself as changing and in process, and the self-image she creates here is one of female strength and creativity, resonant of radical feminist discourses.

Similarly, both dominant *and* oppositional discourses construct Vicky's understanding of her changing subjectivity:

PB: Uumm, what about your self-identity, how has that changed...how you see yourself

Vicky: Oh, very much so - changed. Um, I see myself as a very positive person, a lot of the time, obviously everyone gets down. But I feel confident within myself - ready to face the world [small laugh]

PB: Do you think you've always been a positive person?

Vicky: I think...I don't know. I don't know..

PB: You didn't see yourself that way before?

Vicky: No I didn't, never.

PB: Oh, that's interesting. Because ever since I've known you, you've described yourself as a positive person.

Vicky: Yeah, but I don't think I felt that way inside. I think it's because ever since I was 16 [my husband] always praised me...praise, praise, praise. I think he's given me that. But I never felt like that inside. But now I do.

PB: You've realised it for yourself.

Vicky: Yeah

PB: That's fantastic. And, I mean, before you saw yourself as primarily as a wife and mother - has that changed?

Vicky: As a mother?

PB: No as a woman...you know, before you would have probably primarily seen yourself as a wife and as a mother...

Vicky: Now I'd say no, umm, I see myself as an individual now, who works, earns good money, goes shopping when I want to...

Clearly, Vicky's changing sense of self is not constituted only from oppositional discourses; her description of herself fits in very tightly with neo-liberal discourses constructing subjects as employees and consumers. However, she also draws on liberal feminist discourses of a female subject who understands her role as wife and mother as secondary to her identity as an independent individual with her own needs.

Clearly there is a problem with change through education that stretches no further than the subject's own sense of individuality, without challenging or deconstructing hegemonic discourses that reproduce and maintain social inequalities and mechanisms of oppression(s). Although both Mrs Jones and Vicky represent themselves as becoming more liberated women, they understand such change and remain positioned within neo-liberal discourses.

However, there was some evidence of change that contributed to a more general challenge to the current social order. For example, Kate describes Women's Studies as an 'awakening' and 'an awareness course' claiming: 'the more awareness you've got, the more you question things'. Furthermore, when I asked participants during a Women's Studies group discussion:

PB: I just wanna think about now that we're at the end of the year and I'm wondering what you think you've gained from this year, doing Women's Studies

and how you're gonna take that with you in whatever you do in the future. Big question!

Shelly: Well, I think you know I'm really interested to set up that movement thing, keeping...Perhaps don't call it a movement...

PB: You mean a group - like a women's group?

Shelly: Yeah. (Women's Studies group discussion, 1999)

Shelly was keen to take her learning experience forward to effect feminist change, but also recognised that change is a slow process that happens locally rather than globally. Hence she corrects herself when using the word 'movement' and replaces it with the word I provide 'group'. We did indeed continue to meet as a Women's group on a couple of occasions, however that was disrupted by new employment responsibilities, making it almost impossible for us all to find a time to meet together⁷.

Radical changes occurred at the most local level and within the site of subjectivity through shifting positions. Critical thinking encouraged through feminist post/structuralist pedagogical approaches created spaces for subjects to engage with oppositional discourses and theoretical positions.

PB: Have your attitudes and perspectives changed?

Hilda: Definitely! I have learned to be more tolerant, patient, kinder. I was quite impatient before. I've learned people have different levels, backgrounds, and ideas but that doesn't mean they're not valid. (Hilda, recorded conversation, 1999)

Hilda is self-defined middle-class and describes a majority of her life as experienced through the privilege of her social class positioning. She represents herself as someone who was 'impatient' with (working-class) others; expecting everyone to approach situations the way she did. Through participating on the

Return to Study programme she claims that such notions of class superiority were fundamentally challenged as she had a great deal to learn from the ideas and approaches of the (mostly working-class) students she shared the classroom space with. She repeatedly expressed that one of the main benefits of access education was in meeting people from different backgrounds, raising her awareness that marginal knowledge is different but highly valuable.

Similarly Vanessa expresses a shift in understanding social problems such as homelessness:

Like for example [the Sociology textbook] was talking about people out on the street and their identities and, like an old man sitting over in the corner, that's got ummm, raggedy clothes on and he's like down and out kind of thing. He probably got there through no fault of his own, he probably wasn't always like it. And that makes me think, when I see people like that now, they're probably not just filthy dirty people, they're probably there I mean, look at it, it could probably be you one day, and you could have a house one day and then out on the street on the next (Vanessa, recorded conversation, 1999).

Vanessa, through the Return to Study programme, began to challenge neo-liberal discourses that represented individuals as free to choose their situation, explaining away social problems such as homelessness through the notion of individual success and failure within a meritocratic system. Vanessa's understanding of such problems, through an engagement with critical theory, shifted from being shaped by individualistic discourses to being influenced by sociological explanations of structural inequalities.

The following is from a piece of work completed by Greg on the Return to Study course. It provides an example of a student's engagement with counter hegemonic discourses as a tool for constructing oppositional subjectivities and challenging dominant notions of success and failure:

During my time on the RTS course, I have been able to really allow myself to reflect on my life experiences.

When I left school and went to work, mainly on building sites, I think I chose this area to work in because I felt the only skill I had was that I was "good with my hands". After two years I became self-employed through the influence of my father-in-law who owned his own business. Soon I was working for him as a supervisor and later as a Contracts Manager. My strengths of fairness, openness and honesty were severely challenged by the culture of the people I worked with. I found it extremely difficult to work within this system. Eventually I realised that I was going to have to conform to this culture if I was going to progress. For years I lived as I thought people expected me to live. To some extent it worked, but it was not really me. I did gain lots of new skills through having to negotiate my way through this system, as I thought at the time that this way of life did not come naturally to me. Over the years, as my wife had started a career in social work, our relationship developed as I started to become more confident in our shared beliefs. Eventually I was able to feel confident enough to start to be honest with myself. I started to make informed choices about myself. I am now able to be assertive in more situations as my self-confidence grows. It is a revelation when you start to realise your strengths as a person can also be your skills in your life, either in your working environment or social environment.

Through the reflexivity demanded on the Return to Study course, Greg was able to actively reconsider his subjectivity, relationship to others, and life experiences. He reclaims the values or 'strengths' that had been previously undermined by the competitive culture of the building sites; fairness, openness and honesty. He describes himself as trying to fit in and conform to a system he does not understand or agree with in the name of 'progress'. This resonates with Hall's point that 'identity arises, not so much from the fullness of identity which is already inside us as individuals, but from a *lack* of wholeness which is "filled" from *outside* us, by the ways we imagine ourselves to be seen by *others*' (Hall, 1992: 287-8, original emphases).

Greg's narrative captures this process vividly as he remembers trying so desperately "to live as [he] thought people expected [him] to live". It is through the informal educational process experienced with his wife, as she trained as a

social worker, that the counter hegemonic discursive tools became available to him, intensified by his own participation on the Return to Study course. Greg often saw me before or after class to discuss with me the uncertainty and excitement with which he experienced these shifts in his subjectivity and understandings of the social world.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored participants' representations of their educational experiences through the analytical tools provided by feminist post/structuralist theory. Subjectivity, the focus of my exploration, was conceptualised as dynamic, fluid and unstable against dominant discourses of humanism and neo-liberalism that pose identity as fixed and stable. Participants usually understand themselves through these discourses, often overemphasising and overestimating the stability of subjectivity. Educational participation is often driven by the desire to fully discover the self. As participants pursue such desires through education, their identifications and positions shift in ways that are not necessarily progressive or pleasurable, but cause contradictions, overlaps, confusion and discomfort.

I have argued against the view that access education is simply about progress and success, attempting to reveal the pain and confusion involved in such modernist projects that ignore the power of structural, economic and cultural inequalities. Progress itself has multiple and contested meanings, and the drive for success is often a story of pain and anguish. This is largely due to the concept of success, which automatically implies and demands the concept of failure. The popular expression 'you can't have winners without having losers' illustrates this dichotomy. Therefore, education is not always a story 'with a happy ending', and educational experiences contain moments of pain and danger as well as moments of pleasure and reward.

In the final section I explored the possibility of the reconstruction of oppositional subjectivities that challenge hegemonic discursive practices through educational spaces. If we can find spaces within access education to create oppositional subjectivities, then we can consider the possibility of education as a tool for

mobilising counter hegemonic discourses and struggling for change. This theme will be developed in the next chapter, in which I explore the possibility of creating oppositional discourses within the site of access education, while paying close attention to the ways that radical discourses are actively resisted.

Notes for Chapter Six

¹ The palimpsest is a metaphor 'derived from the image of writing on parchment, writing which is only partially erased to make way for new writing each previous writing, therefore, bumping into and shaping the reading of the next layer of writing. This metaphor is used to explain the ways in which the subject is written and overwritten through multiple and contradictory discourses' (Davies, 1997: 275).

² See Chapter One

³ This metaphor is helpful, however there are some difficulties with it. A pawn cannot become a 'knight' for example, although it can become a queen. Secondly, someone is pushing a pawn on a chessboard into position; it does not have the power to position itself.

⁴ I adopt Lather's definition of 'oppositional', meaning 'those discourses/practices [and subject positions] seeking to challenge the legitimacy of the dominant order and break its hold over social life' (Lather, 1991: xv)

⁵ Not all women have benefited from the Women's Movement in the same way, and it has touched women's lives according to positional factors across age, class, disability, ethnicity, nationality, 'race' and sexuality. Furthermore, the Women's Movement has been challenged as a movement by and for white, middle-class, heterosexual women in developed Western countries (e.g. hooks, 1982; Carby, 1987; Marshall, 1994)

⁶ Women continue to be defined through the patriarchal model of motherhood whether or not they are mothers (Nicolson, 1997:201; Lawrence, 1987: 214).

⁷ I discuss the difficulties of mobilising for change against the pressures that create a survivalist and individualist culture in Chapter Seven.

Chapter Seven: Resisting Radical Discourses

Masculinist epistemology and ways of doing business – whether in global politics, academic or office politics – is competitive, oppositional, and at its most rudimentary, it is war. (...) As with most other disciplinary discourses, one is either “in” or “out” of the dominant camp. Feminist critiques of master discourses are by historical definition “out”. In this divide and rule relation, academic debate is deferred as other (critical) voices are quickly positioned as opposing, contesting, and destructive forces which need to be silenced and put in their place by a verbal dressing down in the textual space of the rational counter-argument: the endless rejoinder (Luke and Gore, 1992: 205).

Introduction and Background

In this chapter, I consider the ways in which radical discourses are resisted within access education. I use the term 'radical' to represent those discourses that attempt to challenge the dominant order and create emancipatory change. I will explore this theme in relation both to my experiences as a feminist tutor at Ford college and my students' experimentations with feminist subject positions. The concept of 'micropolitics' (Ball, 1989) is used as an analytical tool to uncover the discursive and material struggle that occurred in attempts to develop critical and feminist praxis within the organisation where participants and I were located. Finally I consider the possibilities of mobilising counter hegemonic discourses through the site of access education.

As I have traced in Chapters Two and Four, further education has become guided by market principles, and widening educational participation is intimately tied to the project of reforming the welfare state. The FE curriculum, although claimed to be responsive to the needs of 'clients', is heavily but implicitly regulated by the FEFC funding mechanisms (Spours and Lucas, 1996:27). The funding, tied closely to recruitment (the 'Entry' element of funding), progression (the 'Achievement' element of funding) and particularly to retention (the 'On-programme' element of funding), and to the education/work dichotomy, places rigid limitations on the kinds of curriculum and pedagogy possible in the FE classroom, including the access classroom (see Chapter Four). The mainstream discourse that has captured not only the managers and staff within educational institutions, but also the public, emphasises the importance of

employment, 'success', formal qualifications, competitiveness, standards, standardisation and individualism, closing the spaces available for radical educational approaches and discourses. The increasing competitiveness of our culture leads to an individual survival-orientated approach to relationships and life generally, and makes association with radical discourses increasingly risky and dangerous. Both temporal and spatial factors stamp out the opportunities for collective organisation; the pace of life and the will to survive within the existing social order makes it almost impossible to develop collective radical consciousness and to mobilise for social change. As technology conveniently provides a bit of relief in our ever more stressful everyday lives, we rely, for communication, on e-mail and mobile phones. Distance learning through the Internet is appealing because it facilitates educational participation for those who 'juggle' busy lives. However, such methods of communication do not allow for rich discussions and collective activity. Trying to meet regularly with a group of people has become a mind-game; how to synchronise everyone's hectic schedules.

Of course there are still networks, there is still organisation, and feminists manage to remain committed to their politics despite these very real obstacles. However, the rampant individualism that has become so much a part of our culture is yet another barrier in the way of struggling for change. Meanwhile, the hegemonic success of the New Right, followed by that of the Third Way and, to some extent within academia, post-modernism, has made it increasingly unfashionable to speak about 'social change', 'transformation', 'liberation' and particularly 'revolution'. Over the past two decades, the steady flow of distorting media images have created a frightening vision of 'feminists' and 'radicals' in the popular imagination. This has created an opposition not only in the ranks of the dominant classes, those who benefit most from the prevailing social order, but also within mainstream society, including for example many working-class white English communities, leaving a residue of fear of radical discourses.

So where do radical education discourses find a space in such fiercely oppositional environments? Recently, as external moderator, I sat on an Access to Cultural Studies exam board at a London FE college, where the staff

expressed their anxieties that the Course would be closed in favour of the vocational Access courses, which were successful in recruiting large numbers of students (and therefore in accumulating FEFC funding). Students of the Access to Cultural Studies course had shared with me their deep appreciation for the Course and the tutors' pedagogical approaches, claiming the experience had been empowering, transformatory, hugely confidence-boosting and had raised their political consciousness. Here are some of the comments made by students over the three academic years that I have been moderating the course (1997 - 2000):

I didn't realise before that education is about being critical.

The course teaches you to be critical, to think and analyse...things you need in the real world.

All of us are doing this for the pleasure of learning, not for work reasons.

The course made us look at things in a completely different way.

Our relationship with tutors is dynamic and they really listen to what we have to say.

(Students' comments extracted from Access to Cultural Studies external moderation reports 1997-2000)

Such access education programmes, drawing on critical theories, will struggle to survive through the current political climate shaping educational policy and popular attitudes to learning. For example, a recent survey conducted by the University of Warwick into recruitment trends in Access courses across Britain indicates that student numbers are declining on non-vocational Access courses (Field, 1999).

The Concept of Micropolitics

A key focus of this chapter is the micropolitics of the organisation (Ball, 1989) where my research is located in order to bring to light 'hidden meanings' and 'gendered processes of power' (Morley, 1999: 5). Blase (1991: 1) usefully defines micropolitics as being:

About power and how people use it to influence others and to protect themselves. It is about conflict and how people compete with each other to get what they want. It is about co-operation and how people build support among themselves to achieve their ends (cited in Morley, 1999: 5).

I am interested in the struggles between discourses in play within the College and the ways some gain hegemony while others, for example feminist discourses, do not. As I re-read and analysed my research diary, I became aware of the subtle ways my practices and my attempts at curriculum development were undermined by my peers. It was through the reflexivity of the research, rather than in the day-to-day practice of being a feminist tutor, that I became aware of the patterns emerging both in my relationships with peers and students and in the obstacles I faced in the way of developing feminist and critical practice and pedagogy. For example, when 200 leaflets for marketing Women's Studies suddenly went missing, I felt mystified, but did not see that at the time as connected to the micropolitics of our department. Morley significantly points out that:

Like many aspects of racial and gender oppression, bullying and sexual harassment at work, micropolitics can also be subtle, elusive, volatile, difficult to capture, leaving individuals unsure of the validity of their readings of a situation. What appears trivial in a single instance requires new significance when located within a wider analysis of power relations. The attribution of meaning and decoding of transactions, locations and language is an important component of micropolitics. Both feminism and micropolitics privilege processes, rather than structures. Both can label unnamed feelings, experiences, practices and transactions, because the language in which oppressed groups express these phenomena is often politically and socially subjugated and rendered irrelevant or illegitimate by dominant discourses (*ibid.*: 5-6).

Morley argues that feminists 'need both to read organisational micropolitics and evolve their own micropolitical strategies for intervention and change' (*ibid.*). She proposes, and I agree, that an exploration of micropolitics 'exposes subterranean conflicts and the minutiae of social relations' (*ibid.*). She further comments:

The exercising of power in organisations can be overt and identifiable, but also subtle, complex and confusing. Blase and Anderson (1995: 13) suggest that in a postmodern world, power is used and structured into social relations so that it does not appear to be 'used at all. The cultural and feminist approach to micropolitics of organisational life contributes to an understanding of the distorting effects of power and the ways that power is exercised invisibly' (Marshall and Anderson, 1994: 175). A micropolitical analysis renders the competition and domination visible; exposing processes of stalling, sabotage, manipulation, power bargaining, bullying, harassment and spite (*ibid.*).

I will now focus on my own experiences of attempting to develop feminist pedagogical approaches on an access programme at Ford College. My focus rests on the micro-politics of the College and the struggles between dominant and radical discourses. In this first section, I consider power in terms of institutional status, drawing attention to the different experience of and the variable meanings attached to being situated as full-time or part-time lecturer.

From the Centre to the Margins: becoming a part-time tutor

My feelings of marginalisation began and quickly accelerated as I moved from being a permanent member of academic staff, in charge of organising a programme, to teaching part-time. In my role as 'Return to Study Programme Manager', which was my first full-time teaching post, I felt fully supported by my senior managerial staff and I thought I had a good relationship with my peers. I shared an office with the Access Programme Manager, Cynthia Webb, and an Access lecturer, Mary Hills, and the three of us had many informal chats about the links between Return to Study and Access. In fact, Cynthia also taught on my team.

After today's team meeting, Cynthia and I spoke informally about the issue of Access in relation to the development of RTS. Mary Hills joined in the discussion. Cynthia expressed her strong feeling that Access needed to be protected and her concern that the Head of School had been too hasty in thinking Access recruitment was falling behind and therefore we had to cover ourselves by developing new courses. I agreed that Access was of great importance and must be protected, but I added that Return to Study or 'the New Learning Pathway' could exist next to Access and that they could be interlinking and interdependent. Cynthia agreed with me, and said it was wonderful that we shared this space – so we could have these staff room discussions. She told me she thought the Head of Faculty had deliberately placed us in the same room – with Mary Hills – to enable such discussions to take place (Research Diary, 16 January 1998).

At this time, I was excited with the ideas that I was encouraged to follow through. I inherited the Return to Study programme, but I saw it as a larger project, one that fitted Helena Kennedy's proposal for the New Learning Pathway (Kennedy, 1997; see Chapter Two) very closely, and a programme that could meet the myriad needs of adult learners in a complementary way to Access. There are often reasons that Access to Higher Education, a very intense programme concentrating on the preparation of students for higher education, is not suitable for many mature students. Adults returning to learning after a huge gap in formal educational participation need time to build up confidence, understand and engage with the critical, social and structural theories available to explain their school and life experiences and to practise their study skills with tutor support and encouragement.

PB: If you'd come straight into Access with no prior foundation course, what would that have been like?

Kerry: Well, I have an answer for that because my sister came straight into Access from not being in education for a long time. Umm...she fell apart, she could not cope with essays, umm, the pressure of something having to be handed in on a deadline and she actually got up and left the classroom in tears on two

occasions. You know, my sister she's - was- a lot more confident than what I ever was, but now I'm more confident. But to see my big sister reduced to feeling like she couldn't cope was very hard on her and on me. And I said to her, you know she knew I'd done the Return to Study course. And she said, well I won't do that, I'll come straight into the Access. But, for the first sort of three months it took its toll on her. She was crying at home, calling me in tears, because going from nothing to the Access course is very intense. And because I had the Return to Study and you, and when I felt that's it I can't do it any more... you were very supportive. My sister felt her tutor didn't support her at all, and felt very let down by her. So, yes there's a massive difference. I am so glad that I had my Return to Study and my easy nursing through the first year, than to go through what she did, because she went through a hell of a lot. (Kerry, recorded conversation, 1999)

Some mature students are self-educated, have the skills to cope with degree-level study, but lack confidence (see Chapter Six). These students might not be able to afford time out of work, unpaid or paid, to participate in a full-time Access course, but Return to Study provides the support to build up confidence levels before embarking on higher level study. Other students might want to take their time through study, fully enjoy the process of learning, and participate in two years of Return to Study before the intense Access year.

Its very clever how Return to Study and the Learning Pathway mix quite well, and then you go on to your Access, so the way its been put together, is really great. I mean Return to Study I think gets your confidence there, and that gives you the confidence to go on to the Learning Pathway and then I think the Study Skills should be expanded in such a way that it helps you sit down and read for a couple of hours and then write for an hour, because you're obviously gonna do a lot of that when you go on to your Access course anyway (Vanessa, recorded conversation, 1999).

These were my reasons for developing another year for the Return to Study programme, and my ideas were firmly supported by managerial staff. Clearly, their reasons may have been different from mine; perhaps they were concerned

with funding issues tied to recruitment and retention, nevertheless, I had the support of senior management. Gaining this kind of support had a significant influence on the micropolitics, particularly with regard to working relationships. Senior management support validated and legitimated my critical discursive practices (at this point I deliberately avoided explicit feminist or radical discourses and attempted to strategically subvert the 'widening educational participation discourse' – see Chapter Four - in order to accommodate my vision for feminist pedagogy and praxis).

When I decided to seek permission to develop a Women's Studies programme for women access students, I was somewhat surprised by the overwhelming senior management support I received. I had expected some struggle, but was given full permission immediately. During that time, I was invited to join the senior management team 'The Learning Age Committee' and was the only lecturer in the group. My image was used on College posters and leaflets, and my photograph and short autobiography were included in College prospectuses and reports, with an emphasis on my achievements as a former Access student now lecturer and PhD student. This was triggered by the fact that I had received the '1998 Cosmopolitan Woman of Achievement Award' and was featured in local newspapers and appeared in Cosmopolitan Magazine. At the time, I only worried about my image in the College in relation to my students:

The possible image I am creating in the eyes of my students seems to be contradictory to the changes I am attempting to create in the FE classroom - changes towards non-competitiveness, collaboration, values on human relationships rather than material and career success. Perhaps rather than being a role model and a woman that students can relate to, I fear that I am just reproducing the image of ambition and success - of the modern day 'super-woman'. I would hate for my story to be used in a right-wing way to suggest that if I could do it, then so can anyone else...so anyone else who is a 'failure' can only blame themselves. What I had hoped to achieve was to make public my experiences to send a message to women that there is life after domestic violence. Women are survivors and they must refuse to carry the guilt imposed on them by society that somehow male violence is their fault. Education can

change lives and through the educational arena women can collectively change social attitudes and values by speaking out and finding a public voice (Research Diary, 16 May 1998).

On reflection, the public recognition I received, as well as the evident support of senior management, did not help my relationship with peers in the long-term, although it certainly made it more difficult for peers to undermine my projects in the short-term. This only became evident however as I lost status in the College when I resigned from my post and continued to teach on a part-time basis.

When I look back, I believe that I became more willing to take risks as a part-time lecturer because I did not fear losing my job. As a full-time programme manager, although I practised feminist pedagogical approaches, I may have been more cautious about explicitly sharing with colleagues my feminist approaches and philosophies. I was more tentative in informal staff room discussions. Because I appeared to be highly valued by senior management, my peers seemed to be much more cautious about the ways that they treated me as well. They were less likely to challenge my positions. As a part-time member of staff, who in some ways, in the eyes of senior management, betrayed the College by resigning my post, I was no longer protected from challenge. I was on the outside, and I no longer felt any institutional attachment. As my subjectivity shifted from full-time lecturer to full-time doctoral student, I became far more critical of my own classroom practices, and of the content that was imposed on both students and me. Reading widely on critical and feminist pedagogy and wanting to experiment with theory by putting it into practice, and not constantly having to worry about the security of my job, I was prepared to take more chances. I was also more aware of the increasing resistance of colleagues to my approaches.

Active Other/ing

Looking back through my research diary, a pattern that emerges is the ways in which I, as a feminist tutor, was 'actively othered' by my peers who reinforced my position outside of 'legitimate' discourses. My attempts to create spaces to

practice feminist post/structural pedagogies for emancipatory education, to confront and disrupt hierarchical relations of power and to develop methodologies that started from a feminist standpoint were actively othered in ways that fed into stereotypes of radical discourses as dangerous and perverse.

The following extract from my research diary describes my experiences of a Return to Study team meeting held just after I had received public recognition in the local paper for winning the award. At the time, I was a permanent member of staff, and 'Programme Manager' of the Return to Study programme. In the newspaper article, my experiences of surviving a violent marriage were publicly disclosed. This public disclosure shaped the interchange of our team meeting:

Tuesday 3.2.98: Today we had a team meeting about developing the Return to Study year two course. Jan Reed immediately had patronising words to say to me. "I saw your 5 minutes of fame in the paper" she told me. Celia Lance was listening carefully – she had not seen the article herself. Jan asked me how I felt about the personal bits and I told her I had made a decision to speak publicly about the issue as I was determined not to collude in hiding Domestic Violence within the private sphere. She answered back that she felt it had been "inappropriate" and that I was not presenting an image as a "manager in charge of over 100 students". I appeared "weak", she argued, and "vulnerable" and "personal problems should be dealt with through inner strength and not talked about again and again". I explained that my reasons for speaking out were political, and that Domestic Violence was not a personal problem nor was it a private issue, and as long as it was regarded as such, thousands of women would remain in danger. It took courage and strength to speak about it publicly. I added that I would never want to subscribe to the model of management she was referring to and that I did not want to be perceived as an authority figure, but a woman who had experiences that other women could relate to, a person who could be approached. I wanted to create some sense of equality in my relationships with staff and students. After all, I added, the programme was for groups who had experienced material disadvantages, may have low levels of self-confidence and may have experienced domestic violence themselves. She remarked that I had the misconception that Return to Study students were

victims. Before Jan or I could say more, Cynthia Webb joined us, and we began the agenda of the team meeting (Research Diary 3 February 1998).

Valerie Hey uses the concept of the 'hidden curriculum vitae' (Cohen, 1999) to represent 'a resistant act towards those who would erase the difference of 'past lives' (Hey, 2000: 172). Jan, positioning herself within the discourse of professionalism, attempted to erase the difference of my 'past lives' on the basis that reference to it was inappropriate to my position as further education manager. The discourse between us felt 'combative' (Maher and Tetreault, 1994), as my colleague firmly aligned herself with masculine models of management and authority against my 'weak' and 'vulnerable' public 'confessions'. There was a denial that issues such as male violence deeply touch a significant number of women's lives, and that we, as tutors of mature women students, are aware of the kinds of traumas experienced by this cohort of students. Her insistence that Domestic Violence was a personal problem that I should not speak about, and her chastising tone, were warnings that I was on fragile ground, stepping outside of patriarchal discourses of what it means to manage a programme within a mainstream further education course. The exchange had to be negotiated in the public language of the professional meeting, a language that served to privilege Jan's disapproval of my attempting to speak about an area of life perceived as 'unspeakable' in such public forums (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998; Mauthner, 1998: 45).

The discourse she deployed operated to render invisible and individualise the gendered experiences of women. Her denial of the structural constraints and disadvantages experienced by many Return to Study students, re-privileged the ideology of individualism and meritocracy, and the patriarchal separation of the private and the public spheres of life. Feminists have uncovered the ways that the separation of the private and public perpetuate women's inequality and powerlessness, by excluding their experiences and needs from the public/political arena of social life (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998). Patriarchal ways of being, thinking and speaking are upheld, while feminist ones are positioned as abnormal, deviant and unprofessional. However, Jan's explanation of how I appeared 'weak' and 'vulnerable' in the eyes of those who make sense of

life through 'insider' lens, illustrates why women like Jan feel safer aligning themselves with a masculinist position, while 'actively othering' women who do not. Foucault named such processes 'technologies of normalisation'; attempts to regulate or correct any deviations from established social norms (Rabinow, 1984: 20-22). As Alison Jones explains individuals are:

less likely to take up alternative rather than prevailing subject positions. This is because the dominant positions are embedded in the sets of meanings which define what is 'ordinary' and what we might take for granted about, say, gender. The 'alternative' or oppositional positions are not seen by girls [or women] as desirable – or even possible – alternatives (Jones, 1993: 161).

Silencing Radical Pedagogies

Students also described being positioned as 'the outsider' through dominant discourses. For example, Dorothy described the way she often felt silenced and 'othered' as both a student and a mother. Such feelings were intensified while taking a teacher's training course at Ford College. She had initially returned to education three years earlier after many years of battling within the school system to acquire additional support for her dyslexic son. As a concerned mother, she joined the Dyslexic Association and attended a meeting, but was unable to participate due to the professional language being used by the delegates that operated to exclude those outside the boundaries of professionalism. She became determined to learn more about dyslexia in order to put forward her son's case and came to the College for a course on dyslexia.

I went to a meeting, there were a few head teachers, a few educational psychologists...it was quite a big meeting and I sat there and I felt like although I'm here I'm not here. I felt like I'm over there looking in. Because they were all talking in this terminology that I didn't understand. And the day I walked out of that meeting I thought I've got to find all this out for his sake more than anything. I went to the Dyslexic Association and said I want to learn more. How can I go about learning more? And they said well there's courses at Y College. You had to be interviewed and everything and it was a big palaver and at the time my Dad wasn't well. I went to the interview but I couldn't go on the course. I put it

off for a year. Then I found out that this College was doing the course. It was basically a Learning Support programme based on Dyslexia (Dorothy, recorded conversation, 1999).

Upon completion, she continued at the College with Word Power, Return to Study, GCSE Humanities and English. After a few months of working voluntarily in the College as a classroom assistant, she was employed to continue supporting students with learning difficulties. This led her to take the teacher's training course. She describes the way she felt her work as an advocate of dyslexic students was constantly being undermined in the College and particularly by her tutor on the Course. She illustrated her point by describing her experience of presenting a 'micro session', an assessed teaching exercise in which students had to present a 20 minute lesson of their choice to their colleagues.

Dorothy: He says all these, you know, vary your teaching methods, give praise where it's due and he never does. We've been in there since September and only now are we just starting to get to know each other. I could have so easily got into a political row with him the other day.

PB: Tell me about that.

Dorothy: I did the micro-session on Dyslexia. At first I explained about the brain and dyslexia. Then I went on to umm, I had the overhead projector and then, first I went through the facts provided by the Dyslexic Association...umm, and then I pulled three people up for a role play. It was completely varied, I did the overhead projector, the hand-outs, equipment used to help dyslexic students...anyway I pulled three people up and the first one I asked to read out to the class a hand-out that was written in Chinese. And I acted like a strict teacher asking "why can't you read it? You have to read it!" and the tutor only thought I was being rude! And umm, before I finished I said that "as teachers of adults you should be aware that some of these people have had a lot of difficulties at school and they do bear scars from school". So when I finished, it was the feedback session and the tutor said I was giving conflicting information.

And then he said, he sort of said I should get my facts straight, he said "one minute you're saying it's genes and then you're saying it's to do with the way people have been treated at school" and...

PB: But the feedback session isn't supposed to be about the content of your session, it's supposed to be about your teaching strategies, so why was he drilling you about your subject?

Dorothy: Because it's dyslexia again. I don't know what it is...I get the feeling that they think I'm some sort of witch doctor spreading all these terrible rumours that the education system doesn't cater for underachieving kids.

PB: Which is the truth, that's what happens...and actually what your saying is that it's not the dyslexic students who are the problem...

Dorothy: It is the truth. So what I quoted to him - I said at the moment 45% of prisoners are dyslexic and he gave me such a look! And the Dyslexic Association is trying to help these prisoners to read and write. And if he'd allowed me to go on...I did say to him, it's all to do with league tables as well. I said these schools have to show these league tables that they're performing well, and to have all these disruptive underachieving kids is no good for them so they find all ways to get them out. So what happens they end up on the streets and eventually in prison. Anyway, he went on and then he hands out three bits of paper to get feedback from the class. And the feedback from the class was just unreal. They all thought it was very good. And then the following week another student did his micro session on knots! Everyone laughed because when we got hand-outs with all these bits of string and all that to try to do these knots...see now if he had started the session off with why he was interested in this, we would have had a better understanding. If he started out explaining he climbs mountains so it's life saving...

PB: How did you find that out then?

Dorothy: Because the tutor did say at the end that if he started off telling us...but that's what I mean you're never right, because when I spoke about dyslexia I started off with why I was interested in it and a couple of times I referred to my son - and he said at the end "how do you feel about her using her family as an example?" The class thought it was good, but I got the sense that he felt I shouldn't use my family. He made me feel I should never ever use my family as an example now and yet the next week he's telling this bloke that he should start off with why he's interested...

PB: You should've stood up and said 'aren't you a bit contradictory?' [laugh]

Dorothy: I feel I really should stand up and say loads of things but I've got to the point now where I think "oh just keep your mouth shut, it's not worth it". Because he'll come back with something else. (Dorothy, recorded conversation, 1999)

Dorothy is undermined when she draws on her experiences of mothering a dyslexic son. Although the other student is advised to draw attention to his personal interest, Dorothy's personal interest is constructed as illegitimate because it is located in a feminised realm of the private that is forbidden to appear in public fields such as the classroom. The tutor utilises the opportunity to juxtapose acceptable (masculine) interests against unacceptable (feminine) interests in the context of 'appropriate' teaching behaviour. He appears to go to lengths to weaken her attempts to raise critical awareness amongst student teachers from a perspective of dyslexic students. Dorothy is positioned as the confused subject, who has her 'facts' wrong and illegitimately attempts to draw on the non/authority of personal experience.

Dorothy and I seemed to share a commonality of experience as we both struggled to raise critical awareness within the college and introduce alternative pedagogical approaches that privileged the 'voice of the other' and challenged dominant regimes of truth.

On the Outside Looking In

Within the access programme department at Ford college, where my teaching and research was located, there was a strong professional ethic that demanded and privileged a distanced, objective and neutral position that I saw as impossible and dishonest. In my feminist practice as a teacher and researcher, I felt that my experiences as a mature student, as a mother, as a survivor of domestic violence, were useful stories to share with students in the project of widening educational participation. Reflexivity was central to my teaching approaches, reinforced by my role as a researcher keeping a diary of classroom experiences and interested in deconstructing and re/developing empowering pedagogy. I actively drew attention to power relationships in the classroom and in the College generally, explicitly politicising the courses I was engaged in teaching. I attempted to challenge and develop curriculum and pedagogy through the subversion of existing courses and the introduction of the Women's Studies programme. Experimenting with critical pedagogical approaches, I emphasised the personal, attempted to integrate a politics of difference into classroom dynamics and encouraged students to contribute to theory and meaning reconstruction. Students, also participants in my PhD research, worked with me in refashioning methodology, pedagogy and epistemology.

Meanwhile, I sensed a growing hostility to my feminist approaches, a disapproval of my openness with students, and a fear that I was sabotaging colleagues' positions of power. My colleagues continued to embrace objectivity and professionalism, while I emphasised the subjective and the interconnections between the personal and the social. Through feminist post/structural pedagogical practices (see Chapter Four) I deliberately sought to destabilise conventional relations of power between teacher and student. My peers did not approve of such oppositional approaches as these challenged the certainties of teacher-authority they depended upon in the classroom. As the only feminist within the access department, I was unable to build genuine alliances¹, although both of my male line managers supported my ideas and practices on the basis that they were lucrative to 'our business', the quasi-market of education.

Yet, I felt increasingly marginalised and rejected by my peers. My colleagues may have felt isolated from the research, because they were not actively producing it. Perhaps they felt threatened by the collaborative approaches that were formed between researcher and students, which challenged conventional forms of research and teaching. With hindsight, it may have proven beneficial, particularly in terms of negotiating resistance to the mobilisation of counter-hegemonic practices through this project, to include my peers in the collaborative production of this ethnography. Yet, practically, I had to make choices about the focus of the study, and had decided that students' accounts, contributions and experiences were most important to the aims of this research project (see Chapter One and Two). The emotional structuring, resulting from these research decisions, further complicated by the micropolitics of the access department, produced exclusions that I did not anticipate.

On the other hand, the emotional structuring of this ethnography also produced inclusions. Students enthusiastically participated in the project, particularly as they recognised the research as a space for access student re-presentation. Managerial staff also espoused the project, I suspect because I was positioned as an institutional asset, as a living example of the 'success' of access education. However, this 'positive role model' position did not easily fit my values and politics. At the end of the academic year, I decided to leave my teaching at the College, particularly as I became aware of the draining effect of these relationships on my energy levels and my psyche.

Context, culture and location are also significant in examining the relations/ships and micropolitics of the access department and the ethnography. Ford College is located in a suburb constituted of upper-working and middle class white English people, the majority aspiring to traditional bourgeois values, perhaps a major contributor to the mismatch between my values and that of College staff. However, such an explanation points up the necessity of struggles outside of major cities, and the isolation of identifying with feminism in such geographical conditions. It also brings to the fore my general feelings of being on the outside as an Anglo-American, wife of a working-class British-Cypriot and feminist

academic in a conservative area where mothers are usually constructed as housewives.

This nexus of exclusions and inclusions, non/identifications, power struggles over authority and tensions between marketisation, feminism and convention created particular obstacles for the development of Women's Studies within the access department. Here is some 'memory work' of my experiences of setting up a Women's Studies programme at the College:

By the time of launching the Women's Studies course, I was disadvantaged by my marginal status in the College as a part-time lecturer. My colleagues from its very beginnings had opposed the course. I proposed the course should provide a woman-only space, offered as a three-hour per week option on the Access to Higher Education and Return to Study programmes. My colleagues protested on the grounds that I was excluding male students. I argued that male students could participate on any of the many other courses provided, and we could always develop a special male-only class if the need arose. However, I argued that it was necessary for women students, after years of having their achievements and experiences marginalised, to have a space provided for them to feel safe about exploring their pasts and making sense of these experiences through the body of feminist theory available to them. Ironically both male senior managers supported the course, while my female peers were opposed to the idea². Perhaps due to such strong managerial support, the team finally agreed that we would provide Women's Studies as a course for women.

Later on in the year, I was accused, this time from a male peer, of breaching the equal opportunities policy by excluding men. By this time, as a part-time member of staff, I was not invited to participate in team meetings, and heard these accusations only second-hand. I could not understand how on one hand it was acceptable for me to be excluded from meetings about the course I was responsible for organising, yet simultaneously be accused of causing exclusion. Due to my feminist position, I was outside of the professional discourse, stereotyped as (a reverse) sexist, yet denied a public voice in representing the course I developed, taught and organised. At no time was I invited to discuss the

Women's Studies course on an equal level with my peers; I was systematically excluded from any opportunities to explain my pedagogical approaches and philosophies. Through e-mails, by this time my only way of communicating with my line manager, I argued for the need to protect this woman-only space, and develop a separate space for men to explore issues of gender in relation to their experiences as men. The message I received in response was supportive but the strong support I had initially received as a full-time member of staff had clearly weakened:

Your ideas for men's studies very much fit into my thinking, though I'm not having a lot of response from the team on that one (or even women's studies for that matter...). I shall see what I can do!

I knew the only chance I had to ensure Women's Studies would survive was through recruiting an impressive number of students. Yet as a part-time tutor, I did not have access to incoming students. I requested permission to attend an approaching Open Evening in order to represent the course. My students offered to attend with me, to share their experiences of the course with potential students. We made a beautiful poster together and wrote a piece collectively to reflect the strengths of the course. I was sent a message that it was inappropriate for me, as a part-time member of staff, to attend the Open Evening, and I should simply supply my colleagues with the appropriate publicity material. Following the Open Evening, I was told there had been no enquiries for Women's Studies.

The micropolitics represented³ above reveal the hegemonic struggles that serve as a barrier to the development of radical approaches to teaching and learning within an access education department of a further education college. The appropriation of concepts developed within radical discourses, in this case 'sexism', serves as a weapon against feminist agendas in the patriarchal battle to maintain the status quo. As women's presence has increased within educational institutions, there is a denial that feminism is still needed (Walter, 1998: 2). Furthermore, it has become part of popular understanding that British women have not only achieved social equality, but are now doing better than men (*ibid.*: 1-9). Indeed, over the past two years, particularly at Lifelong Learning Conferences and meetings held in the College, I have heard repeatedly pleas for

widening educational participation advocates to turn their attention away from women and re-focus their energies on men.

Access courses have undoubtedly succeeded in recruiting great numbers of women to education, and have transformed the higher educational profile in terms of gender statistics (see Chapter Five). However, there remains much evidence to support the view that the feminist project is far from over, as women continue to experience material and social inequalities. Within further education, women students are concentrated in traditionally feminine areas, including beauty, administrative, social science and community care courses, preparing women for their entry into low-paid, low-status 'feminised' work (Uden, 1996). Women academics are concentrated in lower status positions and part-time academic staff is constituted of predominately women (Gardiner and O'Rourke, 1998:133). On average, female academics earn £4000 less per year than male academics in the United Kingdom (EOC, 2000). The gap between the hourly pay of men and women working full-time is 18% (*ibid.*) and British women working part-time earn on average slightly more than half the average hourly pay of men working full-time (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2001).

Such evidence supports the continuing need for women-only provision within the wider access education project (Coats 1996, 1994; Elsdon *et al*, 1995). Elsdon *et al* argue the value of women-only provision, drawing on their study of learning within voluntary organisations:

Belonging to something which is especially for them has a particular value...Most [interviewees] felt that they are able to be 'more frank' in the absence of men. In women's groups 'women can be in charge', 'they blossom, aren't edged out by men. Women on their own were considered 'more supportive' of each other, 'interested and caring', and observers as well as members noted the freedom from competition in their groups. There was also a distinct absence of any sense of ritualistic structure or behaviour, and of hierarchy, in all-woman groups.

Important as they were in general, these characteristics of women-only groups were seen to be most significant at periods of major role change. Some examples of...social learning supported by the group at these times drew on the period of isolation experienced by so many women when they have young families. Group support was enabling them to cope, to maintain a

sense of identity, proportion and of wider horizons. At the stage of emergence from exclusive domesticity, and suffering from almost universal loss of confidence in facing the 'outside' world and its tasks, women's groups were reported to be of special value, as they were again when supporting individuals preparing for a new or resumed career and making the requisite changes (Elsdon et al, 1995: 56-57 quoted in McGivney, 1998: 13).

From my personal exchanges with other feminist tutors, it appears the ideological weapons used to undermine the development of radical discourses, pedagogies and approaches are widespread. Where there is student interest, there is institutional resistance. And where there is institutional support, there is lack of student interest. Women generally hesitate to participate in courses that are associated with radical discourses such as feminism, because through this affiliation, they feel, with good reason, they will be risking their chances of 'success' rather than enhancing them. Many women, due to the deep material inequalities that continue to exist and deepen, come to education because they are in highly vulnerable situations; they may be at risk of losing benefits and have little time to invest in 'education' before finding work. However, much of the work that they will find will be situated in the informal sector of work, characterised by the 'housewifization of labour' (Hart, 1992; see Chapter Two). Without the critical education to help women make sense of their gendered experiences, they may not be aware of the root causes but see their hardships as self-inflicted; their fault, their 'failures'.

Denial as a Survival Strategy

Confronting oppression and inequality is a painful journey of critical awareness raising in relation to self, subjectivity and social world.

Lynsey: I must admit that I'm really pleased that I did stay with this Women's Studies course, because I was really in a terrible state through the feminist...

PB: Theory?

Lynsey: Yeah, yeah, I couldn't handle it and I was gonna walk out.

Shelley: Really?

PB: So, why, why was it so difficult? Explain, explain what it was...

Lynsey: I don't know, I think the issues that we were dealing with, and the low self-esteem and the lack of confidence –

Shelley: Did you feel that we were being hostile to men? Being that you've got such a secure-

Lynsey: No, no no! No, I think it was bringing up issues – right, even though I'd faced the issues, of my childhood and everything else, it was still, I think it was the actual talking about it with other women...(Women's Studies group discussion, 1999)

Women's Studies starts from women's perspectives and experiences, but these are often painful, as well as potentially empowering, places to start. Women's experiences and relations are 'socially invisible' (Mauthner, 1998b: 39), locked into the silent space of the personal and private. Speaking about such socially taboo issues as abuse, the contradictions of mothering, depression and low self-esteem, sexuality and desire, often causes guilt, pain and fear and is enmeshed in risk and danger. Furthermore, these 'socially invisible' experiences are contradictory, confusing, multiple and fluid. Confronting painful experiences of oppression takes courage; it often leaves women feeling vulnerable after shattering the mechanisms of denial that have been built up over years of learning how to survive in a misogynist, patriarchal and capitalist society.

Shelly: Umm, one thing I think that's quite sad about the group, is that they're all, all of us are people coming from the same wave length. And people that haven't really been on that wavelength have been lost.

PB: Mm

Shelly: I find that sad, in- in the – the whole thing as a subject, that needs looking into. Is it always going to attract people who've got that vision? Because I'd like to think that, umm, obviously education...

Kate: What vision?

Shelly: You know that sight into life, that openness

Kate: Looking for more...

Shelly: You know, they can see things more, they're not all tunnelled. You know there's a lot of people that would go around and they're just quite happy to be blinkered and not to look for ways, for whatever reasons, it might be fear, insecurity, umm, quite "I'm ok chap, happy" whatever, and I'm getting good marks, where some people like - that isn't enough for them and also they're gonna ask why and question and that perhaps we all are that way and we want to challenge things and change things. I'm not saying we're all the same, but, because we're not all the same, but I'd say there is something in there, that light

PB: There is a sharing of a goal?

Shelly: Yeah, there is something there – there, like you say Penny, that we all share, that has brought us there. What saddens me is that the people that aren't there are the people that have dropped out of – I remember one particular lady whose dropped out very early on, who had a lot of trouble with ideas and things.

PB: Yes

Shelly: But the – the class didn't capture people like that.

PB: Why do you think it didn't capture her? Why do you think she left? If we think about that individual student...

Shelly: I think she probably couldn't hack the umm, the – where we were coming from. I feel that she saw it as hostile, or threatening to her own life and how she was with her husband and with her family and things.

Kate: Happy with what she knew – didn't want it disrupted (Women's Studies group discussion, 1999)

Denial as a survival strategy is an important shield of protection. Although many feminists desire the 'empowerment of women' through disrupting mechanisms of domination and oppression, identification with feminism and other radical discourses necessitates a firm position on the margins of society, and therefore involves risk-taking and a relinquishing of the safety of identification with 'insider positions'. As Skeggs argues in relation to the working-class women she studied,

a movement into middle-class White feminism may involve the complete loss of all that has been invested in, a loss of the only cultural capital they have and know, a movement into a place where they are unlikely to have respect (1997: 155).

The journey a woman experiences on a Women's Studies course, as she studies feminist theories and ideas, involves shifts in thinking from dominant to oppositional discourses. Such shifts are dramatic and traumatic, and often involve significant and frightening challenges to lifestyles, identities and relationships.

I'm not a feminist really, in a way, I mean I don't believe that men should run women down, and abuse them completely. I think they should, there should be a balance. But then I'm a little bit old fashioned as well. You know, like I think a woman should do the house purely because she's better at it, I suppose really, and a man should go out and earn the money. But then I've got like the old fashioned values that I think fit quite nicely with modern ones and they aren't too extreme (Vanessa, recorded conversation, 1999).

Vanessa's comments are made during a period of time when she is struggling to maintain her marriage after a brief separation. This separation was provoked by the identifications and subject positions newly available to her through education that caused frictions with the discursive position of 'wife'. Feminist ideas clearly antagonised her attempts to continue to produce herself through heterosexual discourses that naturalise the domestic division of labour in the struggle to maintain her marriage. Vanessa chose to reject feminism for more liberal middle-of-the-road discourses that resolved the conflict between radical positions and conservative ones. This way Vanessa could position herself as 'a modern woman' while maintaining her identification with particular versions of housewife and mother, hence negotiating the balance required for her to survive the world of home as well as the world of College.

Access Education as a Space for Oppositional Discourses

In this Chapter so far I have attempted to uncover the micropolitics of the College and the ways in which radical, critical and feminist discourses were resisted by both staff and students. Now I want to turn my attention to the ways that access education does provide momentary spaces for challenging dominant ideas and mobilising counter hegemonic discourses. Although I attempted to create such spaces in all of the classes I taught in the College, I felt this was most possible in the Women's Studies course and in the Qualitative Research Methods course I taught for just one term. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, I later discovered that I had been removed from teaching Qualitative Research Methods, not because of a schedule oversight as had been explained to me by the Access Programme Manager, but because she felt I was 'subversive', 'radical' and 'getting students to think too much'.

There were two main reasons that the Women's Studies course provided space for disrupting dominant discourses: the first being that the course was explicitly feminist and the second because students chose the course knowing that it was about feminist theories. This does not mean, though, that they were consistently enthusiastic or desirous of challenging dominant perspectives and understandings. However, they were more open to engaging with feminist and

critical ideas, and the core group of students that remained committed to the course from beginning to end did indeed develop counter hegemonic discourses and practices. This was best illustrated by their desire to continue to meet outside the College to discuss possibilities for change through feminist discourses.

The Qualitative Research Methods class provided spaces for challenge primarily because I was not given any set agenda that prescribed precisely what I was expected to teach aside from the general title 'Qualitative Research Methods', added to which there was no assessed work on the course. This gave us as a class a great deal of freedom to pursue our own epistemological, methodological and theoretical interests and ideas. However, it was through interaction with the class that this developed:

I feel so energised and excited after today's class! I started off by giving the class a short lecture on positivism, which I tried to keep brief and short, and then asked them "what are the implications of this methodological approach for what we think we can know or how we can find out?" What fantastic and intelligent responses! Students came to the conclusion that scientific discourses such as positivism not only maintain the status quo, oppression and what knowledge is considered valid, but also that the structures of domination cannot be broken down by using the same methods as the dominator. We then discussed how, in the academic world, even if you want to change things, in order to get through (i.e. pass), you must follow the rules and regulations of the institution. I then explained to them my own current struggles with critical pedagogy theory - after providing an outline of Freire's ideas - how could I put such theory into practice? We spoke of the constraints and discussed some ideas - students suggested free writing followed by a discussion of the key themes emerging from that writing. We spoke about tutors not setting the agenda, but the problems of this when tutors are constrained by specific criteria tightly regulating their work in the classroom. Students discussed their frustrations with the Access course - with so many facts to memorise they felt there was no space to think for themselves. And then I proposed that we use their ideas to shape our course - fortunately there is no set assignment to prescribe exactly what they have to

cover...indeed I have been given virtual freedom about what I teach this term. One student suggested that we shape the course around my PhD research. The rest of the class was very enthusiastic about this proposition and we decided to proceed with that in mind. (Research Diary, 12 January, 1999)

For the remainder of the term, we focused on epistemological issues emerging from my thesis and their experiences of access education. They contributed to my methodological approach, by discussing with me the reasons and problems implicated in the methods I employed. Indeed, they helped me to decide on the appropriate methods through discussions about methodological issues. Students frequently remarked that they felt this was deep learning, it was stimulating and they were learning how to think critically. However, it also exacerbated some of their frustrations in other classes, igniting the micropolitical situation between my peers and I, leading almost predictably to my dismissal from the course under the guise of timetabling confusions. At the time, however, it was very disappointing, particularly because the students contributed such innovative and insightful ideas, developed significantly their theoretical and critical thinking and found spaces to challenge the dominant discourses that operated to undermine their important contributions and perspectives.

Conclusion

In exploring the micro-politics of an access department within a suburban further education institution, I have examined the ways radical discourses are resisted, both by staff and students. Concepts such as 'active other/ing' reveal the hegemonic struggles between 'insider' and 'outsider' discourses, and the ways in which those identifying with feminism are re/placed firmly on the outside by peers. The mainstream separation of the private and public spheres operates to silence and render invisible women's⁴ experiences and perspectives of the world. Those who seek to make public women's experiences must do so in the absence of a language to express the personal. Women students who engage with feminist ideas and experiment with feminist identities do so at the risk of being 'othered' and of breaking down the shields of denial that have served to protect them from confronting the realities of oppression. Exploring women's

experiences and identifying with feminist and radical discourses is a journey mixed with pain and pleasure, yet paved with emancipatory possibilities.

Notes for Chapter Seven

¹ Although my account here is rather negative with regard to my peer relationships in the College, relationships are complex and there were moments when I did feel supported by different team members. However, the main point is that I was unable to find any women or men who openly identified with feminist politics with whom I could develop alliances.

² The embodiment of gender does not necessarily translate into the adoption of feminist or anti-feminist positions and discourses. Many men draw on feminist theory to make sense of their working, personal, intellectual and emotional subjectivities, while many women position themselves firmly as anti-feminist.

³ This is my version of events from my perspective at the moment of writing it. Written accounts of memories are selective and partial and do not reveal 'the truth'. Memories are always constructions of how we understand our selves and our situations at a precise moment of time and are shaped by historical, political and social contexts. Such understanding is constantly shifting through dynamic discourses.

⁴ Although I do not believe there is one universal 'women's experience', I would argue that the patriarchal separation of the private and the public conceals the similarities between different groups of women. Male violence is one example of a shared experience amongst many women, although there are differences between women's experience of male violence in relation to age, class, dis/ability, nationality and race.

Chapter 8: Conclusions: Access/ing Possibilities

[Returning to education] has shaped my life. It's given me so much independence, I feel so independent now. I feel like my own person (Vicky, recorded conversation, 1999).

My action plan for my future has been greatly enhanced by attending the Return to Study course. By writing about yourself in promotional and self-reflective ways you begin to identify your transferable skills. In life, I feel too much emphasis is put on qualifications and not enough thought put into identifying people's personal skills. As you become more confident and comfortable with yourself, you exude an air of natural competence and positivity. This course, together with my life experiences, has enabled me to identify an area in which I would like to work. This work would entail raising a person's self-esteem and enabling others to value the diversity of individuals (Greg, coursework: Action Plan, Return to Study, 1998).

Introduction

This thesis has been about a small group of access students and their engagement with learning through and against competing discourses of widening educational participation. It focused on access students' auto/biographical accounts of their experiences of returning to learning and what this has to tell us about the processes and practices of access education. Drawing on our written and spoken auto/biographies, I placed the experiences and critiques of students and researcher/teacher at the centre of knowledge production, both in the classroom and in the research process. As teacher *and* researcher, I paid attention to my own location in the research and the relationship that I developed with students/participants. Implicated in this reflexive process were the power relationships that shaped the dynamics of our experiences of teaching and learning and of the research process itself.

In this final chapter, I re-visit the two key themes that run through this thesis, *developing collaborative approaches* and *deconstructing the competing discourses of educational access*. A reflexive examination of the research project threads the chapter together. This involves a reconsideration of my starting points and aims, what I have contributed in terms of theory and practice, the limitations of this project and the ways that further research on access education could usefully build on this study.

Starting Points

My project began from the imperative to reclaim the radical politics associated with access education. This imperative emerged from my critical readings and lived experiences of current policy and practice, which I argue, has undermined the commitment to combat the social inequalities that are institutionalised and discursively reproduced within the academic world. As part of this imperative, I was concerned to contribute to the creation of inclusive strategies for the critical education of marginalised groups. My work was grounded in my own varied experiences of access education, and therefore in an exploration of the auto/biography of the question. I lived out the world of access education as I researched it. Before coming to the research, years earlier I had taken an Access to Higher Education course myself. Following my experiences as an access student, I carried out other research projects within the field of access education at undergraduate and MA levels. As a practitioner I taught on and externally moderated a wide range of access courses. This rich combination of access education experience led me to the aims and research questions set out in Figure 8.A below.

By exploring the autobiography of the question and through interaction with the auto/biographies of access students, I became increasingly interested in the pursuit of collaboration between access teacher/researcher and access student/participant. This strategy presented itself to me through discussions with access students and through my engagement with feminist writings on research and education for social justice. Collaboration became a key tool in my project to contribute to the development of interactive and inclusive access education

policies and practices rooted in critical and reflexive praxis. Such praxis positioned theory re/construction as dependent on the lived experiences, practices and meanings articulated through discussion with access students.

Aims	Research Questions
To trace the shifting, contradictory and hegemonic discourses in play within the field of access education. To deconstruct the dominant discourses of widening educational participation, examining its impact on the policy and political contexts in which access education is firmly located.	What are the connections between critical discourses of access education and dominant discourses of widening educational participation and how do they compare? How can we understand, analyse and deconstruct these discourses in relation to the experiences of access students? How do these discourses frame and shape the experiences of and subject positions available to access students?
To examine the implications of participation in access education for the lives, experiences and subjectivity/ies of access students.	What do the auto/biographies of a small group of access students reveal about dominant discourses of widening educational participation? What impact does educational participation have on the lives, relationships and subjectivity/ies of these access students? How is subjectivity re/produced through the process of participating in the discursive field of access education?
To make a methodological and pedagogical contribution to collaborative approaches within feminist post/structuralist research on access education.	Is collaboration between teacher/researcher and students/participants possible within research on access education? What positive contribution can collaborative approaches make to the field of access education?
To open possibilities for localised change through access education that addresses the cultural and structural dimensions of social injustice.	Can access education address the cultural level of educational mis/recognition as well as the structural level of educational in/equality? Can it challenge dominant discourses of widening educational participation that reinforce such social injustices? How might educational spaces be opened up to mobilise oppositional discourses and subject positions?

Figure 8.A: Aims and Questions

Collaborative Approaches in Access Education

The key contribution this thesis makes is to the development of collaborative methodology and pedagogy in the context of access education. In the project I occupied the dual position of teacher and researcher. This added rich dimensions, and complexities, to my relationship with access students in the

classroom and in the research process. Importantly, my dual position opened up possibilities for developing collaboration between myself and students in all aspects of the study, including the research design, decisions about methods and methodology, thinking through theory and its connection to practice in the light of our experiences, and to some extent, data analysis. A collaborative pedagogy became possible through the research, as co-participants reflexively discussed, critiqued and developed various approaches to teaching and learning. The teacher-as-researcher project proved invaluable in making explicit the connections between collaborative methodology and pedagogy.

My journey through this research challenges conventional accounts of doing social science inquiry that traces a linear and progressive path from start to finish. Rather my experience was fluid and varied; at times it felt progressive, at other times uncertain. My approach highlighted the importance of flexibility and reflexivity in critical research that involves the insights of marginalised groups; in short that I could alter my approach according to the various contexts, situations, subjects and discourses that I encountered throughout the research process. I adopted a systematically reflexive approach that allowed me the scope to respond to the contextual dimensions and complexities of sociological research while being methodical in my practices. I felt it was vital that I continually reshape my methodology through my interaction with different theoretical positions, for example critical theory and feminist poststructuralism, and through the insights and critiques of access students.

When I initially came to the research, I was largely influenced by feminist theories that understood power as structural and monolithic. Such theories did not adequately account for agency or for the complexity of power. Feminist poststructural theory gave me the analytical tools to engage with the complex power relations that produced competing meanings and shifting subject positions within the access department and classrooms in which my work was located (Flax, 1995; Kenway et al, 1994; Jones, 1993). Simultaneously, through the concept of positionality and the feminist insistence on holding on to the material realities that profoundly shape subjects' lives and opportunities, I could also focus on the power relations that were rooted in systemic inequalities such as

class, gender and race (Fraser, 1997; Alcoff, 1988). This eclectic approach led me to use the different and seemingly discordant strands of theory that helped explain the various contexts of the study and the diverse experiences of access students, while also identifying patterns in which subjects were re-inscribed as classed, gendered and raced. These combined theoretical strands, *feminist post/structuralism* (with a slash to signify the structural and poststructural strands), transformed my methodological approach and provided the conceptual tools to pursue non-conventional approaches that embraced collaboration and enabled flexibility in the research design.

Theory alone did not shape this flexible, collaborative and fluid research process. My interaction with different groups of students profoundly influenced the project and was vital to developing a collaborative methodology. Importantly, this was not an approach clearly articulated in my early research proposal, but a vague idea/I that became sharper and more refined through my work in the field (see Chapter Three). In the earlier stages, I discussed my research with Return to Study students, at first tentatively and then more explicitly and frequently. My research only became intensely collaborative during the period that I taught Qualitative Research Methods to a group of Access to Higher Education students (January - April 1999). After discussing my ideas with this group of students, they suggested that they actively work with me on my research design and ethical dilemmas, as a real life scenario of conducting qualitative research. This was a turning point in the development of my/our collaborative methodology. Together we redesigned the research, thinking through ontological and epistemological issues in relation to the different theoretical positions we considered useful for the research. Of course, this had its limitations in terms of 'true collaboration'; for example I had access to academic theory that they had not yet encountered, so I brought the theoretical positions that most interested me into the classroom. Importantly, though, they were able to engage with these different theories and think about the implications of these positions for doing research and, more specifically, for my ethnography. I was impressed with the sophistication of their philosophical discussions and they claimed on many occasions that this was their deepest learning experience to date. Therefore, there were significant connections to be

made between collaborative educational research and pedagogy. Their involvement in the research enabled a rich and critical learning experience for co-participants.

However, the intense level of involvement experienced by the Qualitative Research Methods group, was not carried through to the same extent with other groups that I taught. This was largely due to the curricular constraints of the other access courses, which limited the class time available for thinking about methodology and epistemology. We could, though, spend some time inside and outside the classroom thinking about these issues, and the students did have opportunities to discuss and contribute to the development of the research. There were sessions that directly linked to research methods and I spent some time during the courses thinking through ontological and epistemological issues with students in relation to my study. Examples include thinking about their experience of the research and of access education in relation to their class, gender and race positioning. We considered what knowledge they brought to the classroom and the research that was not legitimised by academic discourses, but was hugely important to the study of access education. We deconstructed dominant discourses of success, progress and individualism in relation to their experiences and perspectives. We discussed themes that emerged in my data, how these could be interpreted and in which ways they challenged or reinforced dominant meanings of access education. We talked about power relations in the classroom and in the research, and what impact this had on epistemological issues. So although collaboration with students was limited due to a range of issues including time, course constraints, investment in and benefit from the PhD project and access to academic theory, students did shape the project in highly significant and constructive ways.

One of the connected and invaluable ways that students shaped the project was through contributing their critiques of teaching and learning. It was through the collaborative methodology that I was able to encourage collaborative attention to questions of pedagogy. Through classroom discussions, student journals, fieldwork diaries, recorded interactive conversations, group discussions and informal chats, we reflexively re-considered our classroom practices and then

reshaped them accordingly. This involved their reflections and analysis of critical pedagogy theory, conventional approaches to teaching and our own negotiated pedagogical practices. Central to critical considerations were concerns about exclusions and inclusions, the production of new forms of knowledge, the reconstruction of (counter) discourses, silence and voice and interactive learning.

Through fieldwork, students' critiques of the pedagogical approaches they encountered in different classrooms were collected:

Its so boring and the lessons drag. I have to force myself to go whereas before I used to look forward to going to [subject]. It's not that it's got harder because I always knew it would go into more depth. But when, when, you taught us, one, I never felt you rushed it, he always seems to be in quite a rush to move onto the next thing and you let people comment. You asked different questions and you even - in checking that we understood it- if someone was looking a bit puzzled you'd say "are you following?" and you'd say it again. Or you'd let us talk about it and not just do the same thing every time. I mean sometimes he'll give us an activity but that's on your own. We don't get the chance to discuss things together which would be much more helpful. I mean when you're a bit older you don't copy from your friend you just discuss it and then write what you both think. I think with a subject like [subject] it should be like that because it's about people, different views, you should be doing it together not on your own. Not just with him talking and you writing. We never take anything in. I could come out of a lesson and you'd say what did you do and I'd say well I don't really know. It's such a rush as well, and he expects you to write a hundred miles an hour. I can't wait 'til it's all over really (Sadie, recorded discussion, 1999).

I felt increasingly concerned, upon hearing students' accounts, through my own subjective experiences of access education and through close examination of policy texts, that pedagogy is no longer being addressed as a significant issue within the dominant discourse of widening educational participation. Issues to do with teaching and learning have been overshadowed by an overemphasis on standards and standardisation (see Chapter Four). During the early stages of the

Access movement, pedagogy was recognised as fundamental to widening educational participation, in the attempt to challenge the elitism, eurocentrism and androcentrism of the academic sphere (Thompson, 2000). Access practitioners were concerned to promote interactive, student-centred approaches to teaching and learning that supported the needs, interests and experiences of local communities (Stuart, 2000). Furthermore, they were committed to placing student experience at the centre of knowledge production, challenging the dominant ideologies, canons and discourses within and without the academic world that operate to reproduce structural and cultural inequalities. Approaches to pedagogy were often shaped by the critical ideas of Paulo Friere and feminist educational theorists. However, the current emphasis, driven by state policy, is pre-occupied with standards, standardisation and a reactive interpretation of the previously critical notion of transparency, involving teaching and learning that is heavily regulated and constrained by pre-determined criteria produced and imposed by 'the experts' (Diamond, 1999). The negotiation between practitioners, students and communities characterising the early Access movement no longer appears to be a strong thread in the fabric of access education, which has struggled to maintain a place against the larger project defined by the dominant discourse of widening educational participation (Thompson, 2000).

I have therefore argued for the revitalisation of discussions about pedagogy rooted in reflexive praxis that are committed both to a politics of difference (drawing on poststructural theory) *and* to anticlassist, antiracist and anti(hetero)sexist practices (drawing on structural theory). I used the research as an instrument for developing pedagogical approaches that included access students in the negotiation of their classroom cultures and learning experiences. The classroom provided a space for students to critique critical pedagogy and the problems these posed for our educational practices. This not only produced data, but also fed into my approaches to collaborative analysis, enabling students to comment on the themes emerging from data using their own critiques. It opened up possibilities for students to actively reshape their learning in collaboration with me, their teacher. This aspect of the research was one I highly valued. It

generated collaborative forms of educational research that required the critical contributions of students in the development of interactive pedagogy.

I was limited, however, in the ways I could expand this aspect of the research. When I used this approach most explicitly in the Qualitative Research Methods class, the Programme Manager swiftly removed me from teaching the course the following term. Eventually I discovered that she perceived my classroom practices as 'too radical and subversive' and 'getting the students thinking too much'. One of the problems was that the active involvement of students in my classes, encouraged students to take their critiques to other classroom situations where teachers were hostile to such interventions. My research needed another layer in which I worked directly with other access teachers to explain and involve them in my research aims. Partly because my research did not directly include their collaboration, my colleagues began to feel alienated from my work. This of course raised many ethical issues, caused me to feel isolated and was a barrier to carrying out my research aims.

Deconstructing Discourses of Access Education

The rising tensions between my colleagues and me were largely caused by the competing discourses in play within our department in which we actively produced different versions of 'being an access tutor'. Through these competing discourses, the meaning of access education was contested and reconstructed, producing a range of subject positions available to access students and staff. By tracing the competing, marginal and hegemonic discourses within access education from various thematic perspectives, I have identified the contradictory positions open to access students and teachers that cause dilemmas for their sense of self (see Chapters Five, Six and Seven). This aspect of the project revealed the nuances and complexities of the lived world of access education, a world marked by confusions and contradictions and uneasy partnerships between radical politics and academic traditions.

The competing meanings of educational access

Today I bumped into Linda at the school. She explained that her tutors were frequently asking her about her future plans in relationship to work. One of her tutors suggested that with her computing courses she could go into secretarial work. Linda said she wasn't sure what she wanted to do - except for keep studying. She felt she didn't know what she would do if she had to stop studying now. She explained that learning for her was something so much deeper than work skills (Research Diary, May 2000).

There are tensions between the dominant discourse of widening educational participation, generated through central policy texts, and the ideology of access education originating in the access movement. Of course, this is not lived out in terms of two neatly defined positions, as there is a range of competing discourses in circulation at any one time in the struggle between players to define and control the access education agenda. However, in order to deconstruct this struggle, and its political ramifications, I have identified two analytically distinct discourses (see Chapter Two). The first, the dominant discourse of widening educational participation, is part of a larger agenda to reform the welfare state and to regenerate the national economy and emphasises Basic and Key skills through access to *further* education. The second, the ideology of access education, has been concerned to widen access to social groups who have been culturally and socially excluded from degree-level study and to include such groups in the production of knowledge and meaning making against hegemonic and common sense discourses. Access education has been primarily concerned with access to *higher education* through providing opportunities such as Access to Higher Education programmes that engage students in critical inquiry.

The thesis deconstructs the policy and politics in which dominant notions of widening educational participation have overshadowed the radical project of access education for social justice. Values of individual enterprise, risk-taking and competitiveness are (re)privileged in and through the hegemonic discourse. Locating problems such as poverty and social exclusion within the (dependent)

individual, the discourse ignores a British history rooted in colonialism and institutional classism, racism and sexism. Rather, the discourse upholds the notion of a meritocratic society in which enterprising individuals grab the (presumed) equally available opportunities to improve their futures by progressing through education and into work. It operates to render invisible the ways that it re/positions subjects hierarchically as classed, raced and gendered, thereby reproducing social inequalities and social exclusions.

I argued therefore that the discourse of widening educational participation may exacerbate the marginalisation and poverty experienced by social groups already particularly vulnerable in British society. Drawing on Hart's (1992) adaptation of the concept of the 'housewifization of labour', I described the contemporary conditions of waged labour into which many access students will be steered. Through strategies that are central to the Government's initiatives to widen educational participation, 'the unemployed' will be forced to take up instrumentally oriented courses, which focus on Basic and Key Skills, to get them off welfare benefits and into work. New Labour's 'third way', informed by Blair's intellectual advisor Anthony Giddens, makes claim to the superiority of a risk society, rejecting the welfare system, as the solution to social exclusion (Giddens, 1998). The underlining assumption of this discourse is that risk-taking 'pays-off', individually and nationally, (Hodgson, 2000: 52-53) while the social security system leads to unhealthy levels of dependence. Further research would be valuable that develops an understanding of the risk-assessment calculations made by students in relation to discourses of the superiority of 'risk-taking'.

New Labour policy reveals its support of educational participation up to a certain level (Level Two) and only if it does not interfere with job seeking (DfEE, June 1999). This has led to a policy emphasis on Basic and Key skills and access to further, rather than higher, education. This means, for example, that most access students are in jeopardy of having to leave further education to take up (often low-paid marginal) work, rather than having the opportunity to undertake degree level study. Furthermore, the government congratulates rather than problematises the ability of many mature students to juggle study, childcare, unpaid and waged labour simultaneously, implicitly suggesting that

those who are able to 'juggle' are the ones who deserve the chance to participate in education. Indeed, this perspective was reinforced by Tessa Blackstone, minister for education, in her keynote speech made at the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's official relaunch of Access to Higher Education programmes (Blackstone, March 1999). My data reveals that students who attempt to 'juggle' are vulnerable to severe levels of exhaustion jeopardising physical and mental health.

Apart from that it's just becoming quite stressful. I think a lot of the time they think their subject is the only thing you've got to do. They don't really think you've got other subjects and other commitments. Its not that I don't want to be there to learn. I just can't handle the pressure of how much stuff they want you to do, even though you've got so much else to do as well. I'm always knackered at the end of the week. (Sadie, recorded conversation, 1999)

The government has dramatically reformed the student funding system, replacing grants with loans, while contradictorily posing widening participation as a key strategy for future national stability. Access students, through such policy, will continue to be forced into increasingly stressful situations dangerous to their health in an attempt to benefit from educational opportunities. Further research is needed to examine the implications of funding policy on mature students' ability to access further and higher education. A commitment to widening participation necessitates a careful consideration by policy makers of the effects of adult learning on the personal finances, relations, subjectivities and family dynamics of mature students.

The discursive construction of access students as 'non-standard' and inferior

Although access education seeks to include women, working class and ethnic minority groups, its location in the academic world, often re/positions access students as inferior and exacerbates feelings of anxiety. Such feelings are generated by the educational practices and discourses in play within academe that re-inscribe and re-construct subjects across and within systems of inequality such as age, class, ethnicity, gender, physical ability and race.

Students' written and spoken accounts continually expressed that educational experiences, past and present, were structured through intimidation and fear (see Chapter Five). Returning to a formal institution of education produced feelings of anxiety for a significant number of participants, which was rooted in the mechanisms of exclusion that serve to position certain groups as not worthy of serious academic pursuit. Discourses of selectivity categorise access students as 'non-standard' and illegitimate and students from marginalised groups are re/constituted through these discourses (Williams, 1997a).

Relatedly, I examined the historical contexts in which access education and, therefore, access students are located. I explored the relationship between the deficit identifications of white working-class women students (expressed through statements such as 'I am not good enough' or 'I don't want to be seen as stupid') and nineteenth century constructs of working-class white women as pathological (Skeggs, 1997). Indeed, white, working-class women continue to be constructed as sources of social problems within contemporary understandings about, for example, single parenthood and educational underachievement. It is through and against such discourses that access students, tutors and policy makers make sense of 'non-traditional' access to education.

The repeated expressions of feelings of fear and intimidation within the students' accounts of their access education experience emphasised the importance of this theme. It is at all stages of the access education process that students are constructed and reconstructed as inferior to the 'normal' student, the 18-year-old A level student. Discourses of selectivity reinforce these constructions and they are repeatedly re-emphasised through discourses of standards and standardisation and struggles over rights to access. These discourses produce access students as 'equal but different' yet their difference is measured against the 'normal' and 'standard' student.

Importantly I also paid attention to the intimidating *practices* of access education, most particularly in relation to pedagogy. The discourse of standards and standardisation is enmeshed in specific pedagogical approaches, such as

examinations. These serve to re-privilege particular groups as 'knowers' and maintain unequal power relationships within a naturalised hierarchy that depends on particular regimes of truth for its maintenance. Examinations are assumed as the obvious solution to the problem of standards and standardisation. Yet, the processes by which examinations serve as a device of 'disciplinary power' are ignored and hidden (Foucault, 1975, 1984; see Chapter Five). Rather, within the hegemonic discourse, examinations are constructed as the objective measurement of achievement (Canaan, 1997). The notion of 'achievement' itself is not critiqued, but rather understood as a universal ideal free from values, politics and cultural associations. This reinforces the popular assumption that Britain is a meritocratic society and conceals that inequalities and exclusions are discursively, structurally and systematically reproduced within institutions such as colleges and universities.

I am not arguing that examinations should never be used in access education or that access education is always an intimidating process that reinforces students' feelings of inferiority. It is important that access students are included in the same educational practices as other students (and vice versa). However, the idea that examinations are always a good thing for *any* students as objective and fair measurements of achievement must be critically interrogated. I am arguing for a reflexive approach to widening participation that places access students and their experiences at the centre of the project to develop more effective and inclusive strategies in the future. In order to widen participation, particular cultural practices rooted in regimes of truth that serve the most powerful must be critiqued and challenged. My research diary account of a recent conversation with a participant illustrates my point:

Today I walked home from the school with Linda. We chatted about her Return to Study course. She is now in her third year at the College, doing the third component of the programme developed by the new Return to Study Programme Manager. It is an AS level, rather than an Open College Network course. It is multi-disciplinary, although not interdisciplinary, as it does not focus on the connections between subjects. Linda is worried about the examinations she has to sit to pass this course in June. Her fear of exams, she explained, may lead her

to drawing a blank. I asked if she was enjoying the course, though. Her reply was that she was in a way, but she wished they would spend more time concentrating on one subject, with more focus on depth rather than breadth. She felt too much emphasis rested on quickly completing assignments in order to gain the qualification, rather than on the learning process that motivated her to continue at College. She explained that they were touching on too many different subjects and as a result not getting much out of anything. Her other frustration was directly related to pedagogy. She could not get to grips with learning by taking notes off the board while the tutor talked. Although she spoke to the tutor about this, nothing had changed. However, she strongly expressed that she did not expect the tutor to change her teaching style just for her sake (Research Diary, 15 March 2001).

Shifting Subjectivities through Educational Participation

A contradiction within the discourse of widening participation is that while it focuses on 'the excluded' it also constructs the British education system as a space of equal opportunity and meritocracy, where all individuals may learn to become 'active citizens' (see Chapter Six). Access students are simultaneously re/produced through positioned discourses of selectivity as classed, gendered and raced while being re/constructed through the shifting discourses available through educational participation. In particular, students are now constructed as 'consumers of education', equal players in the free market of adult education.

In developing this theme of where access students are discursively and structurally located within the contemporary access project, I wanted to understand the implications of educational participation in relation to the multiple discourses it presents to participants. Access students often return to study in the desire for self-discovery. However, the changes created, exacerbated and left unresolved through learning generate painful dilemmas for access students, as well as exciting possibilities. The educational project is not always experienced as progressive or empowering, as much access rhetoric might suggest, but is a source of conflicting emotions and meanings. Educational participation may generate contradictory subjectivities that cause fractures rather

than closures and confusions rather than certainties. Learning may simultaneously be experienced as liberating *and* oppressive as access students encounter new ideas that challenge past securities, perceptions and identifications.

The co-participants of this ethnography experienced a contradiction between the notion of a fixed and stable self, rooted in neo-liberal discourses, and a sense of a shifting and multiple subjectivity exacerbated by engagement with education. The dominant discourse of widening educational participation constructs access students as responsible citizens and workers who have capitalised on their rights to post-compulsory education in order to improve themselves and their families. Structural inequalities such as class and gender are written out of this discourse, while lifelong learning opportunities are presented as available to all responsible citizens who take the rational choice to gain credentials to improve their prospects within (waged) work. Unpaid work such as mothering is not recognised or validated as 'real work' and is only valued when supported by a breadwinner 'partner' within a heterosexual relationship. Gender relations within the family are concealed. Educational participation is constructed as an instrumental action within the neo-liberal project of individual progress and success through market opportunities. Yet, access students often reject these instrumental notions of education. For example, John understood education as a space for social healing, and Linda as a tool to reject a feminised identity of constant selflessness through caring for others (see Chapter Six). Linda's conversation with me as described in my diary excerpt above, also contests that educational participation is instrumentally motivated.

Stretching this challenge to hegemonic discourses even further, I wanted to explore the possibilities of the mobilisation of oppositional discourses through access education. It seemed that the subject position of 'intelligent knower' had been made unavailable to access students throughout their lives, for example at school, in the family, in employment and at college, through dominant discourses that reinforced structural and institutional inequalities. The collaborative approach enabled co-participants to explore the ways different subject positions were un/available to us in relation to age, class, dis/ability,

ethnicity, gender, institutional status and race. Co-participants were able to play with oppositional discourses and practices through collective deconstruction and critique drawing on our own experiences of education. Yet such play through collaborative approaches raised levels of resistance to our classroom and research practices.

Micro-politics and the resistance of radical discourses

Today I asked my colleague if she had seen my Women's Studies validation document anywhere. She answered sharply "Penny does it really matter?" And so I said "yes, I really need it for moderation purposes" and she reluctantly told me where she had filed it away (Research diary, May 1999).

Part of the focus of this thesis rested on my own attempts to mobilise counter-hegemonic discourses within the access department at Ford College, in order to challenge the ways of knowing and thinking that reinforced social inequalities and excluded the experiences and ideas of students. I wanted to understand why the feminist and critical discourses I brought to the classroom and department were actively resisted by peers and, to a smaller extent, students. The conceptual tool of 'micro-politics' (Morley, 1999; Ball, 1987; Hoyle, 1982) helped to reveal the subterranean struggles that occurred between staff occupying different discursive positions (see Chapter Seven). My peers adopted the conventional teacher-position, which depended on playing out a patriarchal discourse of professionalism, legitimate authority¹ and appropriate 'teacherly' behaviour. My position as a feminist was often undermined as the illegitimate position, which further sabotaged my efforts to develop critical praxis for the project of widening participation. I struggled to create a feminist space for women students to explore their experiences and relationship to the world. Keeping a research diary enabled me to identify the subtle ways that my development work at the College was continually undermined, which otherwise may have been too subtle to take seriously or, indeed, even to notice. A close analysis of micro-politics reveals the intricate ways that feminist subjects may be 'actively othered' by those who attempt to regulate any deviations from established social norms through technologies of normalisation.

Positioning myself in the College as a feminist caused problems for me. I did not risk taking up such explicitly feminist positions as a full-time Programme Manager when I was completely dependent on my job. However, once I became a full-time funded doctoral student, and perceived my work in the College as primarily fieldwork, I openly practised critical and feminist approaches as part of my PhD project. Meanwhile, my positionality within the College was affected by my part-time status, placing me at the margins of our department. I have argued that moving from full-time to part-time teacher creates a certain vulnerability connected to a lack of voice, presence and ultimately power within the educational institution. The combination of my part-time status and my identification with feminism damaged my levels of authority and power within the College, particularly in relation to mobilising oppositional discourses and practices of widening educational participation.

Taking up feminist subject positions is also risky for students. This is connected to the impact of education on students' sense of self and their lives and relationships outside of college. Negotiating the contradictory worlds of home, employment and education is a confusing and often painful experience.

Simultaneously, feminist ideas provided many women students with counter-discourses that revealed and challenged social injustice and inequality. For example, feminism provided a version of motherhood that enabled many women students to re-define their experiences as mothers as a legitimate and rich source of knowledge and, indeed, to redefine motherhood itself. Students were able to reconstruct dominant versions of motherhood through their own experience of the contradictions motherhood presents for white, working-class women living in suburban England. Male students were similarly able to deconstruct hegemonic masculinities to reconstruct new oppositional versions of subjectivity (see Chapters Six and Seven).

My thesis argues for an access education that seeks to include access students in the production of knowledge and meaning making. I argue that access education should provide spaces for challenging the dominant discourses that have

reproduced social inequalities and injustices. Yet how can this be a possibility when hegemonic discourses have so much purchase for both access teachers and access students?

Access education is a site of struggle over meanings. I have shown this by tracing the competing discourses that shape access provision, the different ways that access education is understood and valued and the shifting subjectivities of access students themselves. Examining the micro-politics of access education is important because it maps out these tacit struggles and makes them explicit. Research about access education must reveal these hidden struggles in order to mobilise counter-hegemonic discourses that offer access students the space to claim the legitimacy of their experiences and the opportunity to actively contribute to the production of meaning.

It is important to add that the micro-politics re/presented in this thesis were based on my versions of events. My colleagues' perspectives were not collected through this study and therefore could not be presented here. However, my account of bringing radical discourses to a mainstream FE College illustrates the importance of a focus on localised power for making sense of how certain discourses are reprivileged or marginalised, produce positions of risk or safety, power or vulnerability and create or prevent possibilities for change.

Limitations of the Project

The key contributions of this project include the development of collaborative approaches to methodology and pedagogy and an understanding of the contradictory ways in which access students are produced and positioned through and against competing discourses of access education. As part of the reflexivity of the project, it is important that I spend some time considering the limitations of the project.

The collaborative aspect of the research could have been intensified. In the beginning I was overly influenced by positivist notions about conducting sociological research, which initially undermined my ability to innovate

approaches that included participants in all stages of the research. It was not until I had read critical accounts of doing research that rejected positivism that I began to take a clear direction towards collaboration. After teaching the Qualitative Research Methods course, in which I developed a strong sense of collaboration between my students and myself, I could have extended this to my other groups more effectively. I now think it would have been useful to arrange regular group meetings outside of scheduled classes to discuss my research in more detail with participants.

My teacher-as-researcher project centred on students' experiences and critiques of access education. I had to make decisions about the focus of my study, and I did so on the basis that access students' accounts are key in developing strategies to effectively widen educational participation. However, this intense focus on students created tensions within the access department and between colleagues. The discursive struggle between conventional approaches to teaching and the radical positions that I occupied caused feelings of exclusion for my peers and me. As a part-time tutor, I felt I was (deliberately) excluded from formal discussions about our access programmes. My impression is that my peers felt excluded from the developments in my project. Such exclusions exacerbated feelings of hostility towards my work, particularly when colleagues could not relate to my collaborative practices. Indeed, one tutor accused me of 'using the students to do my PhD' and perhaps if I had held regular meetings to explain my methodology and philosophy such accusations would not have been made. However, I must add that I availed myself to informal discussions about my work, and often peers were either uninterested or did not have the time to discuss my project in any detailed way.

Importantly, the thesis has revealed the implicit meanings embedded in competing discourses of widening participation, which constitute students in different ways, often re-inscribing their class, gender and race positioning through education. Competing discourses have a significant impact on the selection of access students and their social positioning in academic spaces, the opportunities made available (or not) to educationally excluded groups and the motives behind these processes. They also produce the various positions

available to students in relation to il/legitimate knowledge and the implications of this for their learning experiences and identity trans/formations. The competing meanings embedded in different discourses re/shape students self-understandings as (not) learners, and why they take up education in the first place.

However, there are gaps within this aspect of my thesis. It draws on a small-scale ethnography of one group of access students in one educational institution. Further research is needed to develop the theme of competing discourses in relation to a wider range of access experiences. The discourses in play at 'Ford' College will have both similarities and differences to the discourses in operation at another institution, say, for example, an inner city London FE College. It is important to compare discursive practices between educational institutions as well as between social groups. This study focused on a group of mostly white, working-class women and how they positioned themselves within and against the discourses in circulation at 'Ford' College. It also took into account the macro-discourses generated by State policy of widening educational participation. It did not take account of how other marginalised social groups are positioned through discourses of widening educational participation. For example, a useful study might focus on a group of young Black men taking access courses in different geographical areas and the ways they are contradictorily positioned through discourses. More research is needed to better understand the workings of discourses in different contexts and what this means for widening participation and access students.

Other limitations of the project have already been highlighted. Collaboration with students was constrained by differential access to academic ideas, levels of investment in the project and reward from participation. Other constraints included issues of data selection and representation, control over analysis and authorship. There were ethical dilemmas relating to my dual position of teacher and researcher, raising concern about consent, disclosure and vulnerability. Although I have tried to be sensitive to and responsible about these ethical issues, I have chosen to include data that I perceive as crucial to this project. The dilemma between excluding data because it touched on sensitive areas or

including data that is important to the research was resolved by maintaining anonymity through pseudonyms. I have tried to protect the identity of all subjects of the research as much as possible and have therefore also changed the names of places and courses.

Finally, my interest in depth rather than breadth has led me to focus intensely on the auto/biographies of a small group of access students from similar social backgrounds. This points to the need to carry out further research that is quantitative and to conduct more qualitative projects that focus on other access contexts.

Further Research

So where do we go from here? My next project is to build on this thesis by focusing on the effects on family finances and relations when adults return to education. Although there has been a large body of research on students' finances (e.g. Hillage et al, 2000; Callender and Smith, 1999; Herbert and Callender, 1997) further research is needed in relation to current policy developments and the impact of these on widening participation for mature students. I am particularly interested in the relationship between implementation of the proposals set out in *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE, 1999) and the financial implications for access students. It would be helpful, therefore, to explore the connection between policy intentions and policy outcomes (Kirton, 1999; Bowe and Ball with Gold, 1992; Ball, 1990, 1994) through the collection of data relating to personal and family financing of adult learning.

Such research is needed to improve our understanding of how access to education could be facilitated through social policy in order to combat social exclusion. Recent longitudinal research has mapped out the rate of return from gaining formal qualifications through schooling on the incomes of individual men and women (Blundell et al, 2000, 1997; Dearden, 1999a, 1999b). However research has *not* considered the effects of adult learning on the personal finances and related family dynamics of mature students. How, for example, are conflicting demands (like the purchase of a new game or clothes for children vs.

books for study) negotiated? Is financial support available at the best time for mature students? Questions like these must be answered in order to understand the particular financial impact of educational participation on access students. Research combining qualitative and quantitative methods would be useful to uncover the interaction between policy, family finances and educational opportunity, and document the detailed processes of how access students manage their finances and structure their lives accordingly. A mixed method approach would help to make sense of the interaction between formal and informal support networks and how this interconnects with ethnicity and gender. For example, certain minority ethnic groups may have informal community financing systems that provide educational opportunities that may have otherwise been inaccessible. To gain insight to the risk-assessment calculations made by students, further research should explore how groups targeted by widening participation policy 'know' whether the prospect of future economic return from education is sufficiently calculable to make the risk of debt bearable.

More generally, it is vital that we encourage and organise lively discussions between students, practitioners, validating bodies, policy makers and academics within the field of access education. Collaboration between all players involved in widening participation is key to combating educational exclusion. This requires that students' critiques and insights are valued as highly as the contributions of academics and policy makers. Together we must deconstruct dominant discourses that serve to reproduce the cultural and structural dimensions of social injustice if we are serious about inclusive education that values diversity. It is important that discussions involving collaborative critical inquiry are held between students, practitioners and academics in the project to widen educational access. As Mary Stuart eloquently argues in the context of widening participation in higher education:

[W]e need to continue to fight for individuals and communities who are not considered to have the right to define their own knowledge. We can use our privileged position to relocate resources to communities to enable them to investigate and explore their knowledge and to then demand other forms of knowledge. We need to learn from such communities about their experience and find ways to articulate this within the changing knowledge base of the academy. For me that is an exciting and difficult project. It is not about

widening participation in higher education simply for the self-improvement or greater inclusion of the masses, it is more radical than that. It is about challenging the academy to allow active participation from a wide range of communities and individuals who will help to redefine the parameters of higher education itself (Stuart, 2000: 33).

Accessing Possibilities

Access education is a site of struggle over meaning and a space of possibility in the creation of new counter-hegemonic discourses through engagement with its key subjects, access students. Collaboration between students, practitioners, academics and policy makers is vital to developing strategies that create inclusive, interactive and open educational programmes for and with marginalised groups. Research on access education that places students at the centre of critical inquiry, produces knowledge that is grounded in their invaluable accounts and critiques. Access students have important things to say about their experiences and if these rich contributions are overlooked or ignored then we fail to achieve the goals of social justice that underpin the access education project. Interactive discussion between all social actors involved in access education is needed to address the limitations and successes of current policy and practice in light of the experiences of access students and practitioners. We need to understand the institutional, discursive and policy constraints that exacerbate rather than combat social exclusion and inequality. Examining the ways we are all embedded and implicated in the very social inequalities that we seek to challenge produces multiple strategies in relation to the specific contexts that we face in our work. The access education project requires flexible approaches to research and pedagogy, which accounts for the diversity of access education experience. In order to address the various levels of inequality shaping the dynamics of access education, we need an eclectic approach to theorising that draws on structural and poststructural insights and reconstructs theory through practice and experience. I have argued for the critical praxis of access education, which reclaims the radical politics of the access movement and seeks to deconstruct hegemonic discourses, challenge unequal relations of power and reconstruct counter-discourses in collaboration with students and through educational spaces filled with possibilities for change.

Access education, as a radical project for social justice, must seek to penetrate the cultural practices of further and higher education if we are serious about combating social exclusion (Thompson, 2000). This does not mean simply opening spaces to fit 'non-standard' students in. This requires effecting change within the culture of post-compulsory education by valuing and legitimising a diverse range of ideas, experiences and perspectives.

Note for Chapter Eight

¹ I am contesting here the notion that the teacher should occupy an unquestioned position of authority over students. However, I do not intend to erase the possibility that alternative reformulations of authority may be useful that sit comfortably with oppositional subject positions (Kirby, 2000; Hindess, 1995). Certainly it is helpful for marginalised groups to carry authority in terms of their diverse sets of experiences and knowledges, although all claims to authority should be open to collective critique, deconstruction and reconstruction.

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Appendix A: Letter to Potential Participant

Dear Student

As you may know, I am a full time research student at the University of London Institute of Education. A key part of my research is to explore the impact of education on the lives of adult learners. This will be a qualitative study, which basically means it will be in-depth, concentrating on a small group of adult learners.

I would like to involve you in this project, so I would appreciate it if you could give this some consideration. The research will be confidential and anonymous – all names will be changed to protect the identity of participants (including the name of the college itself and the geographical area).

I would like to arrange a meeting with you this term to discuss the project with you in more detail. This meeting would last approximately 20 minutes. The point of the initial meeting is to negotiate how we would proceed with the research relationship together, to ensure that you feel happy and secure about your involvement in the project at each stage of its development. If you decide to participate, I might ask you for copies of some of your work or to keep a journal of your thoughts as a student. I might also arrange a small group interview early next term, lasting about one hour, which would look at your experiences of education over the year. Next academic year, I will carry out in-depth recorded conversations with individuals, focusing on educational experiences.

The research will eventually be written up into a thesis which will be held in the University of London library and will be available for anyone to read there (it cannot be removed from the library). However, it is important that you are aware of my intention to eventually publish the thesis into a book. Remember though, I will be changing all names, so that people and places cannot be easily recognisable by anyone reading the book. I plan to complete the thesis over the next three years; I hope to finish by September 2001.

Please fill out the slip below and return to me at your earliest convenience.
Thank you very much for your time and your co-operation.

Yours sincerely

Penny Jane Burke

... ..

NameCourse(s)

Address

Telephone NumberI do/do not wish to participate in the research

Appendix B: Guidelines for Recorded Conversation

Turning Points: Returning to Education:

*What were your circumstances leading up to your decision to return to education? How did you/significant others feel about this decision?
Had your self-expectations changed?
What did you hope to gain from your return to education?
How did you decide on a course?*

Transitions and Adjustments: Induction to student life:

*Were there any obstacles in the way of your ability to participate in education?
If so, how did you overcome these obstacles?
What adjustments did you need to make to accommodate your chosen course(s)?
What was it like when you first approached the college? How did you feel about being in a classroom again? What was it like to be a part of a group of students?*

Experiences, Relationships and Critiques: Being a mature student:

*What do you enjoy most about your course(s)? What do you enjoy least? How do you feel about the teaching methods? Assessment? Coursework?
Do you feel treated as a respected and active member of the classroom? Of the College?
Describe your relationship with tutors and other staff. Describe your relationship with other students.
Does access education feel different to your experience of schooling? Explain.
What are some of the difficulties you experience as a mature student? Has maturity been an advantage to your experiences of learning in any ways?
Have your relationships outside of college been affected in any ways?
How do you manage learning and other responsibilities and commitments?
Has education interfered with other aspects of your life? Has it enhanced other aspects of your life in any ways?*

Choices, Opportunities, Decisions:

*What has influenced the choices you have made about what to study (initially, at present and in the future)?
Have there been any other obstacles to your ability to benefit from education?
Would you say education has created more opportunities for you? If so how?
What do you want to gain from education now?*

Identity and Subjectivity:

*What impact has adult education had on you and the way you see yourself (or those around you)?
Have your attitudes/perspectives/values changed in any ways since you came to college? Have your self-expectations changed?
What are some of your hopes and fears?
Summarise the significance of access education for your life.*

Appendix C: Autobiography Guidelines

The purpose of this autobiography is for you to tell me your story without a great deal of influence from me. Therefore I do not want to set questions or make these guidelines rigid in any way. However, I will explain what I hope to gain from collecting your autobiography and will also make some suggestions about areas of your life experience you may want to write about.

What do I hope to gain from the autobiography?

I want to understand and trace your life experience, focusing on the way you have felt about yourself as a student/learner, the way you have felt about your student experiences, transitions in your life, factors which have influenced your educational choices, and the affects of education on your life.

What should your autobiography look like?

Everybody's autobiography will look different, as it will be an expression of his or her unique life/educational story.

However, there are some areas that you may reflect on as you write:

Early Schooling: How do you remember school at primary level and how did that affect the transition you made to secondary school? How did relationships with peers/teachers/family affect your experiences of schooling and your self-expectations? What factors shaped the choices that you made? What were your hopes and fears?

Choices: Reflect on the choices you made upon leaving secondary school and the reasons you made these choices. How did you perceive yourself and how did this influence the choices you made? How did your experience at secondary school influence the choices you made upon leaving? What were your hopes and fears for the future?

Returning to Education: What were your circumstances leading up to your decision to return to education? How did you feel about this decision? Did you get any support? Was anybody against this decision? Had your self-expectations changed? What did you hope to gain from your return to education?

Induction to student life: What was it like when you first approached the College? How did you decide on a course? What was it like in the first term? How did you find the lessons? Were they what you expected? What was it like to be a part of a group of students? What were the initial difficulties?

Being a mature student: What impact has adult education had on you? Have you changed in any ways since you came to college? Does this experience of learning feel different to your experience of schooling? Have your expectations changed? How do you feel about your relationship with your tutors? What are some of your hopes and fears? What do you want to gain from education now? What are some of the difficulties you experience? What are some of the pleasures of

learning? How does your experience of education connect with the other parts of your life? Has your identity as a student affected other relationships in any ways? How do you manage learning and other responsibilities and commitments?

*** Please use the above guidelines as a source of support only. You do not need to answer all of the questions and you could completely disregard them and write freely about your educational/life story.**

Once I have collected your autobiography, I will arrange to meet with you individually to discuss it. The point of this meeting will be to draw on some of the areas that you have raised and explore them together. This meeting will be recorded, with your permission (if you are not happy with me recording this meeting, I could take notes).

Appendix D: Recorded Group Discussion Guidelines

(Return to Study 1999)

Section One: Exploring expectations of education

1. Lets consider why you chose to enrol on this course initially. What were your initial expectations of the course?
2. How has your experience of the course differed from your expectations of the course?

Section Two: Exploring ourselves in relation to education

1. What have you learned about yourselves from the course?
2. How did you feel about learning interactively in a group?
3. Consider what you have gained from participating in the course.
4. What did you most enjoy about the course?
5. Were there areas of the course that disappointed you? Frustrated you? What might you change about the course?
6. Was the course different from other educational experiences you have had? If so, how? If not, why?

Section Three: Future aspirations

1. Has the course enabled you to imagine possibilities for your future?
2. Will you continue to participate in education? If so, why? If not, why?

